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“GO OUT THERE AND ADVANCE”
Neoliberal Agency in Feminism

Leadership for Change: European and Global Politics
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ABSTRACT

Lida Jokinen: “GO OUT THERE AND ADVANCE”: Neoliberal Agency in Feminism
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For several decades, feminism has evolved as a part of changing societies. Correspondingly, changes in feminism have been reflected on societal systems. According to several scholars and commentators, the neoliberal shifts of the past fifty years have co-opted the mainstream feminism and resulted in what they call neoliberal feminism. In consequence, the new rationale demands individuals to alter themselves to suit market principles, overshadowing societal issues of equality.

This study investigates such developments of feminism. It analyzes the self-reliant political agency of self-identified feminists operating in the Finnish context, focusing on the apparently neoliberalistic practice of self leadership. The research is conducted with the help of Grounded Theory method which underscores the collaboration of empirical data, rigorous coding, and theorization. As a methodology, the GT method was used as a frame within which data was coded and analyzed.

As the empirical data, this study analyzes seven semi-structured in-depth interviews which amounted to approximately 330 minutes in total. The questionnaire consisted of questions on feminism, self leadership, and the overall experiences and understandings which may or may not resonate with neoliberal views. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the Atlas.ti coding software. In addition, literature reviews on development of feminisms and self leadership were conducted to add rigor to the theorization.

The findings of this research revealed four core categories that emerged from the narratives of the feminists. The categories were “self-observation”, “internal boundaries”, “success and leadership”, and “emerging soft values”. Upon the analysis, these categories disclosed the participants’ approaches to the values and practices that critics have identified as neoliberal. As a result, the study suggests that feminism in the Finnish context has attained neoliberal elements. The participants were highly self-conscious and used self leadership strategies to battle various biases. Encouragement of others and of self were regarded a useful tool in increasing balance and equality. Yet to argue that feminism has become neoliberalized is unjustified. Despite their internal efforts, the participants did not demonstrate disregard of structural issues. On the contrary, they demanded equal opportunities intersectionally and found participation to capitalism an insufficient measure of equality.

The results of this study describe the development of feminisms and contests the notion that individualistic elements have neoliberalized feminism. In future research, larger samples can enrich the outcomes and result in more generalizable knowledge.

Keywords: self leadership, neoliberalism, feminism, grounded theory

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Over decades, feminism has metamorphosed within societies. In the past few years, the concept has resurfaced in the contemporary popular discourses of various arenas. Today, political figures and celebrities alike have a thing to say about the “f-word”. A variety of social media movements, institutional programs, and organizational projects take up feminist issues (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; McRobbie, 2015). In 2017, feminism landed as the online dictionary Merriam-Webster’s word of the year with a 70% increase of searches over the previous year. The term is wildly popular, and people are seeking to understand what it means (Leanne, 2017). Concurrently with such interest, an imagery has emerged of upbeat, empowered, and happiness-seeking feminist idols who promote personal empowerment. These figures advocate liberation through freedom of choice, power postures, mental reconfiguration, and personal entrepreneurialism (Gill, 2017). Indeed, an increasing number of publications paint an empowerment-exuding picture of contemporary feminism, but the picture is controversial.

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* serves as a prime illustration of the controversies. The book distributes personal advice for women looking to build a successful career by transforming their own beliefs and behavior. An optimal starting point for this thesis, the book and its implications have attained colossal attention in the mainstream media. Publications from *Harvard Business Review* to the *Daily Beast* have endorsed and rebuked the book respectively (see for example Behson, 2013 and Fitzsimons, Kay, & Yun Kim, 2018 for HBR; Goldberg, 2013 and Seligson, 2013 for DB). Alongside the recognition by influencers and readers, the book immediately attracted intense academic criticism. Scholarly critics (e.g. Lakämper, 2017; McRobbie, 2013, 2015; Rottenberg, 2017) argue that while appealing on the surface, *Lean In* places the responsibility for gender equality on individual women, dismissing systemic issues such as inequality in care work. Despite Sandberg recounting both structural and individual questions, critics note that the book ultimately supports the existing neoliberal system and fails to recognize privilege and the context it complies to. Indeed, a larger debate hurls on whether feminism has become co-opted by neoliberal capitalism, dismissing the revolution of social structures, and transformed into “neoliberal feminism” (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 418). The

concept of neoliberalized feminism is founded, primarily, on the critical notion that feminism today foregrounds capitalist values, individual choice over structural criticism, and personal engineering to reach gender equality (Ferguson, 2017). While collective action has become private in the form of blogging and “liking” on personal devices (Chrisler, 2012), individual action and choice is emphasized as a pathway to equality. At the same time, individuals are provided with an abundance of self-help books and guides for attaining personal responsibility of their lives.

This thesis analyzes the transformation of feminisms in the face of current developments and challenges. As a movement and ideology, feminism has evolved as a part of society for decades. What we now narrate as distinct waves of feminism are cycles of development throughout the history of our societies. Today, it is argued by some, feminism relies on the self-reliant agency of individuals. The interest of this study, then, is to critically examine this claim by contrasting understandings of feminism with neoliberalistic patterns of behavior and thought. Such neoliberalistic practice, one may argue, is self leadership¹. Due to its qualities of individualism and self-determination, self leadership can be described as inherently neoliberalistic. The practice consists of strategies that an individual uses to observe and lead themselves to reach a goal (Manz, 1986). Self leadership appears on publications such as *Forbes* (Cancialosi, 2017; Kozelouzek, 2018) and *Huffington Post* (Levene, 2011), in university modules and lectures (Aalto University, n.d.; London Business School, 2017; University of Tampere, n.d.), and in a variety of communities from LinkedIn (Tzimas, 2016) to Christianity Today (Hybels, 2001). Indisputably, self leadership reaches wide audiences, and feminist publications are not an exception. Indeed, Sandberg’s *Lean In* is essentially a guide for women’s self leadership and as such, it is criticised as neoliberal. But are these presumably neoliberal characteristics of self leadership actualized in feminists’ behavior? And further, how neoliberal *is* self leadership? These questions, along with personal interest in self leadership, prompted conducting the research at hand.

¹ The concept has both a hyphenated and an open compound spelling. In this thesis, with the exception of original quotes with different spelling, the open compound spelling will be used.

1.2 Research Gap and Research Question

The objective of this research is to analyze the ways in which feminism actualizes the neoliberalist self-reliant agency. Neoliberal feminism has been explored to a limited extent in theoretical and empirical dimensions. In the scholarly literature, the understandings of neoliberalism are essentially divided into two considerations; deeming it an omnipotent impostor on feminism, or, in contrast, an emergent feminist ideology driven by feminists (Ferguson, 2017). In addition to theoretical debates, neoliberalistic elements have been empirically examined, to some extent, in relation to gender. Such empirical work has focused on existing beliefs of, or attitudes towards what are understood as the neoliberal components in the women's movement. These components include phenomena such as empowerment, self-assessment, and self-efficacy, and they are introduced in the following paragraphs.

The diversity in empowerment research illustrates how ambiguous the concept truly is. Empowerment, and that of women in particular, has been claimed by a multitude of groups from feminist academics to development practitioners and policy makers. As Cornwall and Edwards (2014) demonstrate in their work on women's pathways to empowerment globally, empowerment can be seen both as a structural and an individual concept. The structural understanding foregrounds collective action and organized programmes directed to shift power to the powerless. This approach includes development agencies' and policy makers' efforts in the forms of micro loans, quotas, and legal reforms. These collective structural changes, according to supporters of the structural view, can be overshadowed by the emerging and popularized understandings of individual empowerment (*ibid*, p. 6). Indeed, the empowerment as a process in individuals emphasizes women's personal understanding and consciousness of their situation. Cornwall and Edwards (2014) refer to Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002), when arguing that means of structural empowerment are "enabling factors" of bettering women's lives, but that they "cannot be interpreted as a proxy for empowerment" (p. 7). According to this view, empowerment happens beyond any financial, political or social efforts from outside and rather, as a shift of consciousness that changes beliefs of powerlessness. Indeed, as Cornwall and Edwards (*ibid*) note, there seems to exist a general agreement in feminist discourse that empowerment can only be succeeded by women themselves. Nazneen, Drakwah and Sultan (2014) further denote that a top-down or outward-in view of empowerment has been critiqued by a number of feminist scholars.

As an internal experience and process, then, empowerment has been studied particularly in relation to women's self-perceptions. For instance, empowerment has been connected to positive body image (e.g. Kinsaul, Curtin, Bazzini, & Martz, 2014; Peterson, Grippo, Tantleff-Dunn, 2008) and feminist self-identifying (Swirsky & Angelone, 2016). In such research, a measure such as Rogers, Chamberlin and Ellison's (1997) Empowerment Scale is frequently used for assessment. In addition to feminist and social science domains, individual components of the scale are examined in studies of various fields. Self-efficacy, for instance, is frequently the unit of measure in gendered leadership and organizational studies. Self-efficacy refers to the extent to which a person believes they² are able to perform a particular behavior (Prussia, Anderson, & Manz, 1998). For example, Díaz (2017) investigated the differences in perceived leadership self-efficacy between 73 male and 80 female MBA students in Tijuana, Mexico. The purpose was to determine whether the women's internal consideration had reduced their chances of advancement into leadership roles. The results showed no difference in the perceived self-efficacies of the groups, suggesting that in these particular samplings, gender played no role in internal assessments. Flanagan (2015), however, found differing results in their study of the impacts of gender stereotypes on assessments of management skills and goal setting. The results suggested that women who were reminded of gender expectations rated their skills significantly lower compared to the male counterparts.

Indeed, a multitude of studies measure beliefs and affects such as self-efficacy or confidence, yet actions of self-regulatory empowerment are scarcely investigated. Consequently, a number of scholars have demanded more examination of what women do by themselves to impact their own and other women's lives (Nazneen, Darkwah, & Sultan, 2014). Therefore, this study aims to identify the way those identifying as feminists actualize internal agency in their behavior. In particular, the neoliberal self-regulatory processes are examined by using the model of self leadership. Self leadership was selected for this study as a model of self-regulation due to its potential and topicality both in the popular media and the academia. Further, it provides an interesting frame for investigating if and how, tackling structural and individual issues, feminists self-lead. To date, self leadership has not been systematically examined in relation to feminism. According to Manz (2015), self leadership research has primarily focused on organizational settings, concerning mainly the self-

² In this paper, a singular "they" is utilized, unless otherwise preferred by participants. Consistently used from the 1300s, it provides a useful term which also aligns with the Finnish non-binary singular pronouns used in the Finnish-language interviews (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

influence processes in the work environment (e.g. Neck & Manz, 1996; Neck, Nouri, & Godwin, 2003; Roberts & Foti, 1998). In the light of such emphasis on organizational settings, Manz (2015) and Neck and Houghton (2006) suggest that there is demand for further research in other environments, such as participation and empowerment. Indeed, Manz's (ibid., p. 133) justification of organizational self leadership resonates with the portrayal of neoliberal feminism:

For example, employment and work roles typically include certain demands and boundaries and some kind of management or leadership influence. Yet ultimately the individual employee decides how demands, boundaries, and leadership influence enter into his or her choices and behaviours. Guidance and direction can be accepted, ignored, or selectively acted upon depending on the extent to which persons incorporate this external influence into their own self-influence processes.

In consequence, the research at hand will examine the relation of self leadership and realizations of feminism today. Specifically, this study delves into the self leadership practices of feminism in the Finnish context. My research question is:

Q1: To what extent does contemporary feminism in Finland demonstrate neoliberal self-reliant agency?

Furthermore, in order to approach this question, my additional research questions are as follows:

Q2: Which practices of self leadership, if any, are used in individual efforts driven by feminism?

Q3: In what manner does self-regulative action correspond with the idea of neoliberalized feminism?

1.3 Purpose and Significance

This research is multidisciplinary. On the one hand, it is a report on the political movements and individual realizations of feminism, examining understandings of power and responsibility. On the other hand, the research discusses the sociological concepts of our

society, culture, and gender. In addition, the thesis at hand explores leadership studies with its focus on self leadership, which again, relates to the societal trends of today.

The aim of this research is to analyze whether and how contemporary feminism actualizes the neoliberal self-reliant agency. The purpose of the research is two-fold. First, it sheds light on the internal practices feminists use to challenge experienced biases and issues. This may offer insight into what feminism means in the concrete terms of behavior. Second, it strives to lead a fresh, multifaceted conversation about feminist self-reliance and self leadership in action. In essence, the thesis reflects how feminist practices reflect the transformations of society. Thus, the objective is not make normative claims about neoliberal feminism or how self leadership, or self-regulative practices in general, ought to be utilized.

1.4 Structure of Research

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Following the Introduction, the second chapter introduces Grounded Theory as a method and theory of this research. Next, Chapter **3** explores the topics of the self leadership practice and feminism, and their neoliberal context. Following them, Chapter **4** outlines the research process and introduces the data and categorization in detail. Chapter **5** presents the analysis of this study. Next, findings and discussion are unraveled in Chapter **6**, after which the paper is finally concluded in Chapter **7**.

Chapter 2: Grounded Theory

This research explores the way in which feminism changes as a part of society and, on the other hand, the way reflects changes in society as a whole. In specific, the focus of the study is on the manner in which, if any, self leadership practices emerge in contemporary feminism. While the study aims to develop knowledge about such societal, cultural, and political phenomena, its means is to approach them in an empirical form. Inherent here is the understanding that societal dogmas are reflected in individuals' impressions and actions. In consequence, the study requires a method that enables the exploration of empirical data while also incorporating broader theorization. Such a method is Grounded Theory.

This chapter explores Grounded Theory as the method of inquiry. First, the it casts a glance at the background and development of the theory. Further, it introduces the coding and analysis methods central to the method. Second, the chapter aims to justify why, precisely, Grounded Theory is the method of choice for the present study on neoliberal feminism.

2.1 Basis of Grounded Theory

Central to qualitative research methods is observing and explaining human behavior that is affected by several factors (Metsämuuronen, 2008). Among those qualitative approaches is the Grounded Theory method, which places particular focus on identifying categories and their relations (Järvinen & Järvinen, 1996). In Grounded Theory, or GT, the researcher systematically creates a new, substantive theory by analyzing, comparing, and categorizing data (Walker & Myrick, 2006). Further, a GT researcher uses empirical data to “ground” the research while simultaneously applying theorization and literature (ibid.). Comparatively, this study intends to disclose what emerges from narratives where feminism and self leadership are juxtaposed. The study is “grounded” through data of actual feminists and enriched with theorization from scholarly literature and analysis. Notions are deducted from the empirical data and coded into categories. Theorization of neoliberal feminism, however, is deducted into analyzing the findings. Therefore, GT studies such as the present one include both inductive and deductive elements and might perhaps be best described as abductive (Dey, 2007).

The quintessential questions posed in Grounded Theory exemplify the nature of the approach. As Dey (2007, p. 84) notes, a GT researcher asks of the data questions such as

“What is happening in this data?” and seeks to understand the comprehensive image emerging from the data. Correspondingly, this study strives to disclose what is emergent in the contemporary feminism and, in specific, what surfaces in relation to the neoliberal self-regulative agency. In this manner, I aim to actualize Dey’s (2007) description of a GT researcher who investigates what there is in the data without predispositions.

The Grounded Theory method cannot be defined in a single, restricted manner. First, different understandings exist on the inherent meaning of term. Rather than a particular method, Metsämuuronen (2008) denotes that Grounded Theory is a way of thinking and conceptualizing data. Bryant and Charmaz (2007), then, denote that the term “grounded *theory*” sometimes refers to the outcome of a GT research process but is customarily used to describe the research *method*. Second, due to the existence of its many versions and editions, GT is a method with various adaptations (Dey, 2007). Grounded Theory was originally presented by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 and it has since been interpreted and accentuated in different ways. Even the founding developers of the theory eventually disagreed strongly on certain principles of the method and parted ways publicly (Metsämuuronen, 2008; Syrjäläinen, Eronen, & Värri, 2007). The GT method, as reported by Bryant and Charmaz (2007, p. 2), “has been influential and influenced by other methods in various fields and disciplines”.

However, the defining features of discovery through categorization and comparison, as well as the focus on empiria, are a common thread to all understandings of Grounded Theory (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006a). Initially, the intention of Glaser and Strauss was to strengthen the tradition of qualitative research. They wished to incorporate into GT the depth of traditional qualitative methods and the rigor and logic of quantitative research. Further, it was perceived as a way to create theory drawing from research data instead of testing the ideas developed beforehand (Dey, 2007). In particular, Glaser and Strauss (1967) formulated the method to avoid the “opportunistic use of theories” (p. 4–5). As such they characterised, for instance, highly empirical studies with little connected explanations drawn from logically deduced theories, or “*exemplifying*” (ibid.), where a researcher selectively chooses examples to support their theory. Therefore, Glaser and Strauss underlined the significance of unique data as the basis for coding and establishing theory (Syrjäläinen, Eronen, & Värri, 2007). Indeed, elaborate coding continues to be a fundamental characteristic in GT data analysis, according to Walker and Myrick (2006). In order to code in a disciplined and rigorous manner, I used a software called Atlas.ti. While certain scholars such as Glaser themselves are wary of utilizing software in GT research,

others such as Day deem software tools as a way to make the creative research process more methodic and systematic (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

According to the original GT approach, coding can take three forms; open, axial, and selective coding³. *Open coding* refers to the initial detailed inspection of all the data and conceptualizing its content into different themes or phenomena. As a result, a concept or an idea in the data is given a descriptive code such as *individual proactivity advances success*. In *axial coding*, the phenomena are categorized and inspected axially within their given category (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006b). In practice, this creates multi-level codes with a clear hierarchy such as *SL: Thought: mental imagery*. Bryant and Charmaz (2006), however, argue that the concept of axial coding could defy the core purpose of Grounded Theory. Because axial coding strengthens a category, it could be seen as the researcher forcing a category on the data rather than allowing for data to emerge objectively. This resonates with the conflict of Straussian and Glaserian forms of GT mentioned in the preceeding section and is a noteworthy dilemma of the method. Nevertheless, I found axial coding justified for this study because obtaining the self leadership practices as pre-existing categories was essential for the research. Finally, *selective coding* refers to identifying a core class, comparing it to other categories, and refining the categories accordingly. The principal essence of the data altogether forms a foundation for theorizing (Syrjäläinen, Eronen, & Värri, 2007).

Bryant and Charmaz (2006, p. 168) remark that the categories of coding hold a dual meaning in the theory. They are both analytic and sensitizing, that is, the categories are a tool to conceptualize the central analytic aspects of the phenomena but also to discern the phenomena in commonplace terms (Dey, 2007). Coding continues until saturation is reached, namely, until a robust number of refined codes are created. Metsämuuronen (2008) uses the term “theoretical saturation” (p. 28), indicating that when a category is sufficiently saturated, it may have a guiding role in the research. In this way, the researcher seeks additional supporting samples from the data in order to test the soundness of their theory. This is what Charmaz (2012) names theoretical sampling, a GT strategy that is one of the least used methods, yet also one of the most advantageous. Further, essential to GT is *constant comparison* in which the researcher compares each incident belonging to a category to previous incidents classified to the same and different categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The codes and categories are conceptualized hierarchically with the constant objective to

³ Further introduction into the codes in this research is provided in section 4.4 of the Analysis Methods chapter.

advance from empirical to theoretical level (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006b). Eventually, the researcher defines core categories which incorporate all subcategories and form the basis for the theory. In this way, the researcher generates “a story” out of the themes (Dey, 2007, p. 81).

Finally, Bryant and Charmaz (2007, p. 245) identify memo writing as “*the* fundamental process of researcher/data engagement that results in a ‘grounded’ theory”. In memo writing, the researcher records analytical notions and questions that arise from the data and the categories. This method “speeds analytic momentum” and helps clarify and question the researcher’s choices (Charmaz, 2012, p. 9). In this manner, the analysis progresses from description to conceptualization. Indeed, the rigorous dialogue between the data, the categories, and the researcher renders Grounded Theory applicable for this study in particular. The following section will further justify why GT particularly corresponds with the aim of the present study.

2.2 Grounded Theorization of Neoliberal Self-Reliancy

The research at hand investigates neoliberal self-reliant agency in empirical manifestations of contemporary feminism. In specific, the study focuses in on the self leadership practices of feminism, a topic on which empirical investigation is scarce. While separately the concepts have been vastly discussed, a research gap exists on the interconnection of these phenomena. The method of Grounded Theory, according to Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka (2006a), corresponds with such interdisciplinary and novel nature of the topic. Furthermore, drawing from human experience and empiricism, the research topic conforms with the empirically-inclined GT method. The study is grounded through the narratives of feminists, producing results that are strongly connected to empirical reality. In addition to the focus on experimental data, however, this study utilizes external literature and theorization. In this sense, the study applies the Straussian School of Grounded Theory which it allows for preliminary reading of literature.

In following the Straussian liberties, the research differs from the classic, or Glaserian, method in more senses than one. First, Grounded Theory, particularly in its Glaserian form, is founded strictly on the empirical data first (Syrjäläinen, Eronen, & Värri, 2007). In contrast, in this study, preliminary reading on literature and characterization of the central topics begun before gathering empirical data. Whereas the Glaserian School

concludes that everything, even the research questions, emerge from the data, the Straussian School permits the pre-existing questions and categories such as, in this case, those of self leadership. In addition, the Straussian School emphasizes systematic coding and permits the “preconceptions” of axial codes (Dey, 2007, p. 85)—an approach that was regarded beneficial for the research at hand. In this way, the abductive GT approach permits incorporating preexisting theorizations of neoliberal feminism into the categorization. In consequence, a theoretical dialogue can be obtained with empirical data on feminists’ beliefs and actions.

As Järvinen and Järvinen (1996) note, exploring literature in advance may stimulate theoretical sensitivity but also, it may obstruct expansive analysis. It must also be noted that certain assumptions exist at the outset of the study. For instance, some level of interconnectedness between self-regulatory practices and feminism are hypothesized. Second, as noted, in this research the practices of self leadership formulate pre-existing categories to which the data is compared. In their early work, however, Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that while on the one hand concepts emerge throughout the research when creating a theory from data, on the other hand, they accept that certain models may be derived from sources beyond the data. In this study, a central model is the set of self leadership strategies. Taking into account the deviations from the classic method, this study can be characterized as using a modern Straussian version of Grounded Theory (Järvinen & Järvinen, 1996).

The method of choice poses certain risks that must be acknowledged. First, categorization, which is central to the method, relies on the interaction between the data and its researcher. The researcher in this process is mentally and physically active as they construct the labels. This inclusion of the researcher naturally results in the risk of careless interpretation and bias (Charmaz, 2012). Critics, then, have questioned the objectivity of the knowledge that arises from data with Grounded Theory (Metsämuuronen, 2008). For this reason it is essential for the researcher to remain self-aware and maintain memos to log how the researcher may be affecting the research, and respectively, how the research may impact the researcher (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Second, Grounded Theory is primarily developed for creating new theory but not verifying it. As a result, authenticating the theoretical outcomes is difficult (Metsämuuronen, 2008). Third, research based on Grounded Theory takes time and diligence (Syrjäläinen, Eronen, & Värri, 2007). Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest that doing quality qualitative research in general, and building theory in specific, is oftentimes an understated task. They find that the researcher must respect the challenges of building thick description and full-fledged themes. As a result, one must be prepared to do a

great deal of work and rework in order to avoid producing an underdeveloped qualitative research.

Next, the reader is familiarized with the practice of self leadership, which forms a central coding frame for the research.

Chapter 3: Shifts of Individualism: Self Leadership and Feminist Self-Realincy

The present chapter conceptualizes the key themes of self leadership and feminism. First, subsection **3.1** illustrates in detail the theoretical background and strategies of the self leadership model. It clarifies the foundation and application of the practice central to this study. Subsection **3.2**, then, introduces the history of feminism infused with both collective and individualistic efforts. Its purpose is to provide context for the developing societies and within them, the different faces and phases of feminisms. The section characterizes feminism in terms of time periods, or waves⁴, and connects the movements' development to the neoliberal elements associated with feminism today. Finally, subsection **3.3** explores the concept of neoliberal feminism. It strives to conceptualize the vast and varied scholarly perceptions. On the whole, Chapter **3** contributes to understanding the central dimensions which the reader may use to evaluate the phenomena.

3.1 Leading the Self

The following chapter regards the concept of self leadership, which forms a frame of categorization in this research. First, the practice and its strategies are defined, after which the outcomes and related concepts are expanded upon. Lastly, prevalent critique on the practice is presented in order to recognize the liabilities of the model.

3.1.1 Definition and theoretical history of self leadership

Self leadership is a process through which an individual controls their behavior by using behavioral and cognitive strategies (Neck & Houghton, 2006). The concept of self leadership was coined by a leadership scholar Charles C. Manz in a 1983 practitioner-oriented book. Manz (1986) characterizes the practice as an extensive self-influence perspective that one employs to lead themselves to perform naturally motivating tasks, as well as tasks which are necessary but not intrinsically motivating. Neck and Houghton (2006) note that self leadership essentially concerns the way in which an individual designs their

⁴ According to Ferguson (2017), feminisms have been categorized based on political ideologies (conservative, libertarian), theoretical schools of thought (intersectional, postmodern) and agency (black, queer). In this section, I categorize feminisms by waves in effort to concisely describe the evolution of the movement as a popularized phenomenon.

behavior. What is it, then, that differentiates the practice of self leadership from mere intentional action towards objectives, i.e. “How to achieve a task”? Latham and Locke (1991) maintain that while people are self-regulators by nature in the sense that they are inherently goal-directed, they are not innately effective at this regulation. The self leadership approach is a set of behavioral and cognitive strategies used to enhance this regulation process, and to answer three components of action. The practice requires an individual to consider what the objectives are and what they should be, why said objectives are pursued, and how they may be reached (Manz, 1991, as cited in Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). It is the latter two questions that Manz (1986) considered to distinguish self leadership: the process extends beyond simply managing oneself to reach a goal and, in fact, focuses on the motivations beneath. The questions are embedded in the theoretical framework below based on the original work by Manz (1986).

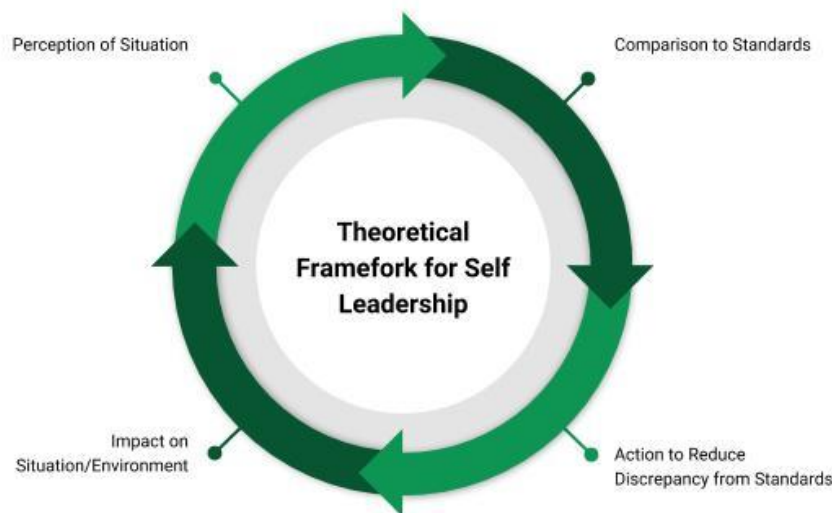


Figure 1: The Theoretical Framework of Self Leadership. Adapted from Manz (1986) and Stewart, Courtright and Manz (2011)

Figure 1 visualizes the framework of self leadership. Focus must be placed on the *Perception of Situation* and *Comparison to Standards*, where the individual not only sets goals but inquires the *why* and *how* of said goals or desires. Following those steps, the individual engages in *Action to Reduce Discrepancy from Standards*, after which an *Impact*

on *Situation or Environment* is expected. A natural consequence is again *Perception of Situation*, where the outcomes of action and the current situation are examined.

Originally, self leadership was developed as an organizational practice that contested the existing leadership theorizations. Neck and Houghton (2006) denote that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, self leadership was chiefly applied to self-managing teams and empowering leadership. The latter, in particular, was explored as a possible contestor of the heroic leadership of the 70s and 80s. Amundsen and Martinsen (2014) note that empowering leadership surfaced as an approach to increase productivity in the face of modern challenges including the increase of knowledge work and flexible organizations. To better meet these developments, empowering leadership emphasized the process of sharing power with the subordinates. In this way, say Amundsen and Martinsen (ibid.), the approach is distinct from other forms such as directive transformational leadership. Empowering leadership supports employees' autonomy and enhances decision-making at lower levels of organization. Indeed, Manz and Sims (2001) themselves call this superleadership due to the fact that empowering leadership promotes employees' self leadership skills.

Self leadership skills have been primarily categorized as a set of strategies and measured with a questionnaire. The strategies are allocated into three categories; behavior-focused strategies, natural rewards strategies, and constructive thought strategies (Anderson and Prussia, 1997; Manz, 1986; Prussia, Anderson, & Manz, 1998). Manz's (1986) first academic report established the basic strategies, although the cognitive strategies were yet underdeveloped. In the year 1987, the first empirical study was presented by Manz and Sims in *Administrative Science Quarterly* with results implicating that the most effective leaders encourage self leadership in employees. In the early 1990s, then, the thought pattern strategies of self leadership were further developed (e.g. Neck & Manz, 1992) and later, found useful in practice through empirical testing (Neck & Manz, 1996). Over the years, several scales have been developed for assessing the use of strategies, but Houghton and Neck's (2002) Revised Self Leadership Questionnaire (RSLQ) in particular has shown consistently good reliability and construct validity. Therefore, it is considered to represent a validated measure of self leadership on individual level (e.g. Mahembe, Engelbrecht, & De Kock, 2013; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart, Courtright & Manz, 2011).

Equipped with the measurement tools and the developed cognitive category of self leadership, a number of researchers have studied the practice, although mainly in organizational contexts. In their 1996 study, Neck found that effective self-regulation in individuals can be developed and learned. A variety of organizational outcomes of

developing self leadership have been reported since. For instance, in the same study, Neck (1996) reported that thought self leadership (TSL) prepared individuals better to an organizational change. The results indicated that when facing organizational change, the use of TSL inflicted more positive thinking and optimistic perceptions of the situation. Further, Sesen, Tabak, and Arli (2017) established that teachers' organizational commitment, innovative behavior, and job satisfaction were all significantly enhanced by practicing self leadership. Additionally, Roberts and Foti (1998) revealed that job satisfaction was higher in the individuals with high self leadership who worked in low structure environments. More, they found that encouraging self leadership in subordinates can enhance their confidence in their decisions and abilities. The goal-setting process was further studied by Neck, Nouri, and Godwin (2003), who revealed that cognitive-based self leadership approaches enhance effective, participative goal setting behavior. Further, Vansandt and Neck (2003) studied self leadership in relation to ethical discrepancies between organizational standards and employee behavior. They concluded that the self leadership practice can be applied as a means to improve moral behavior within the organization.

Besides academic research, depictions of the self leadership practice have emerged in organizational textbooks (e.g. Manz, 1992; Ross, 2015) and popular self help publications (e.g. Provitera, 2012). This may be attributed to the large body of literature supporting positive outcomes beyond the organization and regarding the individual. First, personal achievement and growth is reported to enhance due to improved task performance, creativity, and confidence. More, awareness of negative mechanisms such as arrogance may be provoked by self leadership, which reveals blind spots that hinder growth (Frayne & Geringer, 2000; Houghton & Neck, 2006; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). Second, autonomous behavior is noted to increase because of an upsurge in characteristics such as independency, self-efficacy, and responsibility (Sesen, Tabak, & Arli, 2017; Unsworth & Mason, 2002). Third and finally, self leadership practices are recorded to foster both empowerment and direct positive affect, or enthusiasm (Neck & Manz, 1996; Unsworth & Mason, 2002). A number of these positive effects have indeed been associated to self-regulatory concepts and theories other than self leadership. To clarify the landscape of overlapping terminology, the terms most interconnected to self leadership are unfolded in the next section.

3.1.2 Related concepts

The concept of self leadership lies in the roots of *self-management*, a fundamentally interlaced term which shares the general notion of internal regulation (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Some researchers such as Breevaart, Bakker and Demerouti (2014) even use them as synonyms although today, the two are typically considered to be separate approaches. A classic definition of self-management, also called self-control, was introduced in clinical psychology literature by Thorensen and Mahoney in 1974 (as cited in Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). It was utilized to regulate health-related behaviors such as smoking and later transferred to organizational environment and labeled self-management. Eventually self-management became a cost-cutting approach that, unlike self leadership, could substitute external leadership. Most importantly, in contrast to self leadership, self-management underlines extrinsic motivation and foreground the *how* of reaching objectives. Its tactics are aimed to choose the mode of action most useful in the long run — lacking the assessment of standards, the *why*. Markham and Markham (1995) assert that self-management includes situations where an individual takes responsibility of the result, but not the goals and the means. In summary, self-management is a primarily discipline and behaviorally focused process that does not distinguish between levels of self influence. Therefore, it encompasses only a subsection of self leadership (Kerr & Jernier 1978; Manz, 1986,1991; Markham and Markham, 1995; Neck & Houghton, 2006, Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011).

Whereas self-management composes a subclass of self leadership, the motivational theory of *self-regulation*⁵ (e.g. Carver & Scheier, 1998) is a more extensive approach. Self-regulation studies seek to understand the human behavior and how to affect it. Key components of the theory are the concepts of hope and confidence, which are reflected in the expectations of failure or success. The theory explains the process and failures of self-regulation, but lacks practical ways to increase self-regulatory effectiveness. Moreover, the theory, much like self-management, omits the assessment of standards. Paradoxically, self-regulation seems both an umbrella term and a subsection of self leadership in the sense that it explains “how behavior happens” (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p. 276), yet functions in a narrower theoretical framework than self leadership.

⁵ Note that in the following chapters, the terms *self-regulation* and *self-regulative* are used in their general meaning, not in lieu of the motivational theory. The meaning in the preceding paper is “the act or condition or an instance of regulating oneself or itself”.

Similar to self-regulation theory, Bandura's (1986) *social cognitive theory* also maintains that internal regulation consists of self-monitoring, self-judgements, and self-reactions. The theory is one empirically validated and generally accepted explanatory model for the effectiveness of internal influence. SCT proposes that human behavior is best explained as a reciprocal relationship between the occurring behavior and its internal and external influences. In contrast to self-regulation, the SCT implies that individuals have control of the standards they set. The key factor of the theory is self-efficacy, which explains an individual's personal assessment of the capabilities needed for attaining a goal (Lyons & Bandura 2018). Based on the theory, it is self-efficacy that influences goals, determination, and the way of thinking of an individual. This is a common thread with self leadership which also places emphasis on the concept of self-efficacy (McCormick, 2001; Neck & Houghton, 2006). Yet again, this theory centers around how to build confidence and reach goals with increased self-efficacy, meanwhile self leadership also asks the questions of *what* is aspired and *why*.

Finally, personality traits are a further corresponding approach to self leadership. Writers such as Markham and Markham (1998) have even asked whether certain traits such as conscientiousness are the foundation of practicing self leadership. After all, observing and assessing one's thoughts and behaviors requires a high level of self-conscientiousness. Nevertheless, personality is generally regarded as something fixed while self leadership is perceived to be learned, or learnable. Even if they are not synonymous, they may be connected—however, this question is much disputed in the literature. While some studies suggest a connection between self leadership skills and certain traits such as extraversion, others find no such connection. The researchers who have found a connection propose that the most positively associated attributes are indeed extraversion and conscientiousness (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Still, the general consensus of self leadership being malleable and personality being permanent rather simply implies that they are not one and the same concept, even if overlapping and correlational.

In conclusion, self leadership is a concept that contains a wider approach to self-influence than self-management. It merges the behavioral tactics of self-management to cognitive strategies based on intrinsic motivation and constructive thinking. Specifically, self leadership aspires to not only reduce discrepancies from performance standards but, in essence, to address the standards themselves (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006). The following subsection precisely depicts the self leadership practices, which are also a central frame of coding in this study.

3.1.3 Self leadership strategies

As was mentioned in section 3.1.1, self leadership strategies consist of behavioral strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought patterns. First, behavior-focused strategies aim to increase an individual's self-awareness with the purpose of managing the behavior, particularly towards the necessary but not intrinsically motivating tasks (Neck & Houghton, 2006). The strategies include *self-observation*, *self-goal setting*, *self-reward* (self-reinforcement⁶), *self-punishment* (self-criticism, self-correcting feedback), and *self-cueing* (Anderson & Prussia, 1997; Houghton & Neck, 2002; Manz, 2015; Manz & Neck, 1999; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Prussia, Anderson & Manz, 1998; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). To exemplify the strategies, I apply them to two illustrative contexts throughout this section: first, a situation where an individual wishes to voice their opinions more openly, and second, a situation where an individual has a running goal.

Self-observation, “the lifeblood of self leadership” (Manz, 2015, p. 135), means being aware of *when* and *why* an individual engages in a particular behavior. It can be characterized as heightened self-knowledge and systematically gathering data to change habits. As self-observation, one can take notes about the situations where they hesitate to speak up, or time their running laps. With this information about current behavior and performance, an individual can effectively set goals for themselves (Manz & Sims, 1980; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Neck & Manz, 2015). A number of studies note that careful *self-goal setting* can considerably advance the performance level (Neck & Houghton, 2006). In particular, setting specific, challenging, short-range goals supports accomplishing objectives and reinforces action. In continuance to the earlier examples, an individual can self-set goals such as voicing an idea at workplace once a week, or having a specific lap time in running (Manz & Sims, 1980; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011).

Together with self-set goals, *self-rewarding* can encourage an individual to put more intentional effort into attaining goals (Manz, 2015; Manz & Sims, 1980; Neck & Houghton, 2006). The rewards may be intangible such as congratulating oneself after being vocal in a meeting, or it may be tangible such as going on a special vacation after reaching one's goals in a marathon. Manz and Sims (1980) argue that the level of the task aversiveness and the attractiveness of the reward can mediate the impact of rewarding. Nevertheless, it has been proved to yield positive outcomes, which causes more of a dispute in the case of self-

⁶ The strategy titles vary according to the authors. In this paper, the most commonly used names are used from this section onward.

punishment. The challenge with *self-punishment*, typically mental or cognitive, lies in the risk that it is applied in an excessively negative manner. In an effort to reduce harmful behaviors, an individual engages in introspective examination of failures and damaging choices. This criticism, then, may be misapplied by focusing excessively on guilt and disappointment, which is only detrimental to performance and motivation. Rather, an individual should remain self-aware and ask whether the criticism is constructive and corrective or destructive. As a constructive self-punishment, an individual could dissect a situation of failing to give an honest opinion or to reach the finish line in time (Manz & Sims, 2001; Manz & Sims, 1980; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011).

Lastly, *self-cueing* signifies the concrete environmental cues one uses to motivate themselves toward desirable behaviors and outcomes and, respectively, to suppress negative behaviors. They help keep attention and effort on what supports an individual in attaining their goals. As a self-cue, for instance, one could set as a desktop background a motivational text about speaking up, or an image of a marathon runner crossing the finish line (Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011).

Second, natural reward strategies are emotional practices intended to add meaning to tasks and thus provide incentives for desired behaviors. Their objective is to create situations in which an individual feels motivated or rewarded by inherently pleasant aspects of an activity (Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). There are two primary natural reward strategies in self leadership, both of which draw from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). An individual can strive to redesign either their tasks or how they perceive them (Manz, 2015). First, one can foster positive affect and motivate themselves by *embedding tasks with intrinsic rewards*. For instance, one may strive to organize meetings in smaller groups to increase open dialogue. Second, one may *refocus their thinking* away from aversities of tasks and rather on the natural rewards that are part of task performance, thus gaining intrinsic motivation (Manz & Sims, 2001; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). For example, an individual may consciously emphasize the feeling of crossing the finish line amid the strain of training. Essentially, natural reward strategies are applied to create feelings of self-control, competence, and purpose. As a result, they play a significant part in promoting personal initiative and proactive performance (Manz 2015; Manz & Sims, 2001; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011).

Third, constructive thought patterns are a method for managing one's own thinking tendencies (Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). Ways of thinking that can positively impact performance include constructive *self-talk*, *replacing dysfunctional beliefs* and irrational

assumptions, and *mental imagery* or visualization of performance (Houghton & Neck, 2002; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). First, self-talk—what a person covertly tells themselves—should be realistically optimistic rather than pessimistic and negative (Neck & Manz, 1992). For example, constructive self-talk would be to consider one's opinions worth other people's time. Second, dysfunctional or irrational beliefs should be identified and replaced by constructive ones. For instance, a person may recognize a harmful belief that they should be the fastest runner to participate in a marathon. As a result, they may acknowledge that the experience is of value even if there are others who are more advanced. Third, mental imagery is the practice and cognitive creation of an event in advance to the physical action (Neck & Manz, 1992). To do this, an individual could inspect in their mind the critical points of a marathon, and in that way mentally prepare themselves for the endeavor.

The consequences of constructive thought patterns are noted beneficial in many ways. Optimistic views have been linked to greater results in the areas of sales and grades (e.g. Prussia, Anderson, & Manz, 1998), and mental preparation or rehearsal can promote a better refined and adjusted action (Houghton & Neck, 2002; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). They can foster self-efficacy (Stajkovic & Luthans 1998) and enhance performance in a variety of contexts from sports to self-restraint in smoking (Neck & Manz, 1992). To conclude, constructive thought patterns in particular are an essential factor of self leadership that have been developed the furthest from how the self leadership practice emerged in the first academic journal paper in 1986.

3.1.4 Critique on self leadership

In addition to the large number of positive evaluations of the self leadership concept and outcomes, the approach has certainly attained challenges and criticism. First, it is questioned whether self leadership is, in fact, redundant since numerous similar theorizations already exist. For instance, some theorists ask whether self leadership is a mere repackaging of existing classical theories and concepts such as self-regulation theory or personality differences (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Further, questions have arisen about the distinctiveness of the concept in relation to existing models (e.g. Markham & Markham, 1995). Yet, Neck and Houghton (2006) note that self leadership is distinctive in that it is not a descriptive or deductive theory but rather, it is a normative model. As such, it aims to explain how something should be done effectively and prescribe guidance to a process, whereas descriptive theories rather disclose the ways in which the prescriptions of normative theories

operate. Therefore, while self leadership is in many ways founded on classical theories, it is also distinctly separate.

Second, some doubt the practical significance of self leadership on both individual and societal levels. As Latham and Locke (1991) mention, humans tend to be goal-directed and self-regulatory by nature. Nevertheless, as mentioned in a preceding section, they also note that this process is not always effective. Whether internal leadership ought to be optimally effective is naturally debatable, and a question beyond this paper. On an organizational level, however, Manz (2015) himself asserts it is not justified to claim self leadership practices as universally advantageous. Due to differences in variables such as time, the nature of the task, and the importance of subordinate development, "it is naive to assume that relying on self-leadership is always appropriate", note Manz and Sims (2001, p. 63). For example, work involving little creativity and innovation or consisting mainly of simple tasks makes the higher engagement of self leadership more redundant (Manz, 2015). Third, self leadership faces credibility issues due to the scarcity of empirical studies. Particularly in the organizational settings, most studies have been conceptual (Neck & Houghton, 2006). In addition, Markham and Markham (1995) observe that self leadership and self-management have not been differentiated enough in empirical studies. Indeed, the heavy emphasis on conceptual work, together with the deviating versions of self leadership in popular media and self-help books, creates ambiguity around the hyped concept. This challenge is further aggravated by a particular hindrance in the academic research: the development of self leadership practice measurement has been slow. As described in the section 3.1.1, few valid measurement systems have been presented, but the RSLQ has proved to be of relatively good validity as the measurement for individual self leadership (e.g. Mahembe, Engelbrecht, & De Kock, 2013; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart, Courtright & Manz, 2011).

Fourth and finally, as is evident by the name, self leadership pertains a look inwards and may thus be considered egotistical or excessively individualistic. While it cannot be denied that such focus on internal operation is highly individualistic, one may argue that self leadership is not aimed to reach selfish objectives at the cost of others. On the contrary, Manz (2015) contends that effective self leadership helps identify blind spots, such as arrogance or selfishness, in one's own thinking and behavior. For instance, by systematically self-observing one's actions they might enhance their self-awareness about a need to invest more on others' concerns in relation to their own (ibid.). Internal focus can thus increase the need to gratify collective interests, which is exemplified in Luxton's (2010) study of individuals as caregivers. Luxton notes that the people with deep sense of individual responsibility for their

own lives also possessed a strong commitment to the well-being of others because they valued the caregiving characteristic in themselves. More, Manz (2015) emphasizes that self leadership is strongly connected to responsibility, deriving from the self but influencing everyone around the individual. Undoubtedly still, self-focused motivations pose a risk of egotism, and certainly responsabilize the individual. How such elements of individualism are demonstrated in feminist ideologies is the topic of next section. Thereupon, the following section explores the elements of feminist development.

3.2 Individualistic and Collective Feminisms

From the 18th century suffrage movement to the 1960s-to-80s campaigns for equal employment and sexual rights, feminism has been characterized as struggles for a societal level change. From the 1990s forward, however, the movement has taken new forms of individuality while still battling a myriad of the same issues. Over the years, a sense of self and personal empowerment have been a parcel of feminism but only risen to the forefront recently (Rottenberg, 2017). The next sections outline first the waves of feminism, then dissect topical issues, and finally introduce the neoliberal elements of feminism.

3.2.1 The waves

Early feminism, or *first-wave feminism*, consisted of the work of suffragists. While individual females had protested gender inequalities throughout history, demands for women's rights began to be voiced in unison in the 18th century. The foundation of women's movement lays in the French Revolution in 1780s (Osborne, 2001). At a time when women held no legal status as individuals, early suffragists demanded that women be free, considered capable to reason, and in control of their own property (Powell, 2013; Osborne, 2001). Fervent resistance of inequality was prompted by explicit legal discrimination by France's National Constituent Assembly. The assembly set the *Declaration of the Rights of the Man and the Citizen*, a human civil rights document, in 1789. It declared several rights for the citizens while denoting that a citizen can only be male. As a response, a French playwright and a political activist Olympe de Gouges demanded equality in their *Declaration of the Rights of Women* in 1791. De Gouges' writings against the regime led them to the guillotine two years later, but the opposition did not cease (Osborne, 2001). Political writer Mary Wollstonecraft, at times titled the first feminist, wrote *Vindication of Rights of Woman* in 1792. Wollstonecraft considered females to be able to exercise thought and reason and thus, be citizens like the men were (Powell, 2013). Indeed, citizenship can be characterized as the elemental concept of early women's movements.

By the mid-1800s, two dimensions of citizenship became priorities: enfranchisement and equality in education. In 1824, William Thomson wrote *Appeal*⁷ in response to James Mill's provocative Article on Government. Mill's article stated that women needed not to

⁷ The full title, shortened for convenience, is *Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Retain Them in Political, and thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery*.

vote because they were cared for by men, and working class men needed not to vote because, respectively, they were cared for by their superiors. In *Appeal*, then, Thomson promoted complete legal equality (Osborne, 2001). Legal equality was tied to citizenship, which was further demanded for women by voices such as John Stuart Mill, a member of the British Parliament, who found gender inequality to be an impediment to human development (Powell, 2013; Morales et al., 2005). It wasn't until the late 19th century and early 20th century when first states, including Wyoming Territory in the US, Australia (excluding aboriginal women), Finland, and Russia, gave women the vote. The second focal point, educational rights, were considered significant for the emancipation of women. While they were typically assigned the task of guiding children at home, females had little opportunities for education of their own. The topic was raised by writings such as Hannah More's (1799, as cited in Osborne, 2001) *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*. Work towards educational equality culminated in triumphs such as women being admitted to the University of London in 1868 (University of London, n.d). As a result of Emily Davies' campaign for educational equality, women were finally admitted on entirely equal terms with men in the University of London in 1878 (Osborne, 2001).

Despite the prioritization of enfranchisement and educational opportunities, first wave voices such as Thomson and Mill contested domestic inequalities. In addition to contributing to enfranchisement in *Appeal*, Thomson criticized the gender imbalance in the home. Thomson compared females' sexual and domestic oppression to a form of slavery. Indeed, the connection between abolitionists and feminists grew stronger in the early and mid-1800s as the similarities in their causes surfaced (Osborne, 2001). In particular, Mill found the dependence dynamics of the marriage problematic. During the 19th century, significant advancements were made in women's status as partners in the marriage. For instance, the Divorce Act of 1867 in England made it easier for women to leave a marriage for evidence of cruel and disloyal behavior of the husband (Osborne, 2001). In this vein, structural and juridical triumphs emerged in the domestic terrain.

While structural change was the fundamental aim of the first wave, women's subjective awareness was called for, too. In these endeavors, both political writing and fiction literature functioned as allies for the "Woman Question". In the 18th century novelists such as Mary Hays, Fanny Burney and later on, Jane Austen, impacted gender views with their writing. By the end of 19th century, the concept of "new woman" was encouraged by presentations such as Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) (Osborne, 2001, p. 20). While, for instance, Hardy's book criticizes institutional structures, it also portrays a feminine

subject who is revolutionizing womanhood as an individual. In it, the main female character refuses to conform to the expectations of the era (Liqing & Weiqing, 2015). Another early advocator of personal emancipation is writer and editor Elizabeth Towne in *Joy Philosophy* (1903):

Women as a class do no *think* and command themselves to best advantage. They are content to shoulder any burden they see slipping from the shoulders of another and to spend days and energy in *feeling*. . . It is never too late to drop burdens and use energy to some *purpose*. All one has to do is declare, 'I *have* no burdens—life is a playground!'—and *stick to it*. . . This is the only day this is. Go play in it. (p. 55-56)

Towne's declaration represents a budding call for women to alter themselves internally. Yet, it is the transformation of legal structures that most frequently characterizes the first wave. Indeed, the objectives of equal education opportunities and enfranchisement were met in many regards. In the following decades, however, the pre-existing issues were accompanied by an abundance of others.

The *second-wave of feminism* took place in the 1960s, lasting at least two decades (Orloff & Shiff, 2016; Powell, 2013). After the First World War, when the men returned from the frontier to continue in the jobs briefly held by women, the females generally returned to homemakers. Women in the Western world were considered citizens and were now after political and labor participation (Osborne, 2001). Organizations advocating women's equality emerged to challenge the explicitly discriminatory institutions and to shift the division of domestic work. Reformation of the capitalist and democratic institutions was emphasized by women's right activists, now being called *feminists*, with the objective of including women into politics and labor force and reaching equal pay. Many held that the imbalance could be transformed by legislation including anti-discrimination and harassment laws and instruments for their enforcement. More, social feminists such as Ann Ferguson and Maria Rosa della Costa linked androcentrism to the fundamental nature of mid-twentieth-century capitalism (Funk, 2012).

In addition to the labor and political settings, emphasis grew on the unequal power relations in the home and the private sphere in general (Funk, 2012). Women's sexuality and birth control had become relevant topics with writings such as Simone de Beauvoir's (1954) *The Second Sex* intensifying the debates. The first national Women's Conference was held in Oxford in 1970, resulting in demands such as twenty-four hour nurseries, free contraception, and abortion on demand (Osborne, 2001). Meanwhile, radical feminists aspired to overhaul

the law and attitudes towards sexuality and violence, requiring punishment for sexual perpetrators and critiquing the eroticization of violence and the compulsory nuclear family (Orloff and Shiff, 2016). The family was grounded around the housewife ideal, and writers such as Betty Friedan (1963) recalled that “Some said it was the old problem—education: more and more women had education, which naturally made them unhappy in their role as housewives” (p. 11). At the same time, the objectification of women inflicted resistance in events such as the 1968 Miss America competition. The event was protested by a group labeled Redstockings who revolted on the scene with signs, theatrical performances, and the Freedom Trash Can. This was the setting of the bra burning tale which, in fact, has been distorted. The iconic flames remained only a legend because the protest group had no fire permit (Orloff and Shiff, 2016, TIME magazine, 2014).

A self-titled *third-wave of feminism* began surfacing in the US in the late 90s (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017) with young women such as Rebecca Walker in the January 1992 issue of Ms Magazine stating, “I am not a post-feminism⁸ feminist. I am the third wave” (Aune & Holyoak, 2018, p. 186). If the first wave signifies the 19th century suffrage campaigning and the second wave demanded political and labor equality in the 1960s and 70s, what does, then, the third wave of feminism comprise of? The issues of the third wave, much like the second wave, include unbalanced political representation, harassment, and social control of gender (Aune & Holyoak, 2017; Snyder, 2018; Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017). Whereas the new wave strives to tackle many of the same long-standing dilemmas, it differs from earlier waves in three particular aspects. First, as a reaction to the counterfeit category of “women”, the third wave forefronts personal narratives that exemplify the multidimensional and intersectional character of feminism. Second, third-wavers are perceived to seize “multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification” (Snyder, 2008, p. 175). Third and finally, third-wave feminism underscores an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to set the limits for the feminist political (Snyder 2008).

Such aspiration to delimit the ideology and movement have also aroused critique. Snyder (2008) describes how third wave feminism may seem like “a confusing hodgepodge of personal anecdotes and individualistic claims, in which the whole is less than the sum of its parts” (p. 175) due to its under-theorised disposition. This has led to conflict and confusion on distinct definitions. Further, the exceeding notion of free choice over any other approach has aroused debate. Critics, which include a number of second-wave feminists, argue that the

⁸ Postfeminism is discussed further in a following section.

movement has morphed into only considering choice with little emphasis on how chosen desires are formed or awareness of how an aggregation of single choices may negatively impact gender issues at large. Despite some discourse on the negative effects that, for example, the beauty industry may have, the principle of choice seems to generally overrule all else (Snyder, 2008). Yet, there are more fundamental foci than freedom of choice that characterize the third wave. According to Öchsner and Murray (2018), the third wave puts more emphasis on individual identity than the preceding movements. New emerging issues such as freedom of attire, body image, criticism towards media messages, and inclusivity beyond white Western females are forefronted (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017).

Third-wavers have been characterized as wanting to separate themselves from the second wave. According to Snyder (2008), they generally claim to be less judgemental and rigid than the earlier generation, which they portray as anti-sex, anti-femininity, and anti-fun. The third wave strives to be more inclusive and diverse, although Henry (2006) argues that outlining second-wave feminism as merely white feminism is exaggerated. Framing it so, according to Henry, is a way to present one own movement as more progressive as their predecessors. Further, Aune and Holyoak (2017) state that rather than being a separate entity from its predecessor, third-wave feminism is rather an adjacent branch of a significant approach within the second wave. In the 1980's, feminism split over questions including prostitution and pornography, into approaches one of which does not disaccord with the alleged progressive views of the third wave. Therefore, it is useful to see that the metaphor of waves implies continuity and resurgence of ideas rather than an explicit break between generations. The waves represent a period of peak movement activity within a context without dismissing the array of ideologies (Aune & Holyoak, 2018; Öchsner and Murray, 2018).

In addition, some writers acknowledge the existence of *fourth-wave feminism*, which is considered to have emerged approximately from 2008 onwards, characterized by focus on technology and social media as well as intersectionality. However, the distinctiveness of this ideology as separate from other waves of feminism is questionable, and perhaps best described as battling many of the same issues with different tools, i.e. the social media (Looft, 2017).

Finally, approximately at the same time with third-wave feminism emerged an approach called *postfeminism*, with definitions as plentiful. The foundation was laid as early as 1980s when the term feminism had become caricatured in the media to the extent that many a woman begun their statements on social criticism by uttering, "I'm not a feminist,

but...” (Osborne, 2001, p. 32). Media’s caricatures of a bra-burning, man-hating feminist made many hesitant to call themselves one (McCabe, 2005; Swirsky & Angelone, 2014; Twenge & Zucker, 1999). According to Gill and Scharff (2011), postfeminism, with its *post*-prefix, stems from the perception that social and cultural conditions have shifted in a way that feminism is considered no longer necessary. This concept of postfeminism seems to be divided into two kinds of understandings: first, an anti-feminist backlash to earlier generations of feminism that proclaim the death of feminism (Gill & Scharff, 2011), and second, an intersectional continuance of feminism that wishes to distance itself from the preceding eras (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017). The anti-feminist position derives largely from postfeminists’ efforts to reject cultural aspects of second-wave feminism as irrelevant to women of today (Rottenberg, 2017; Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017). The second understanding, however, presumes an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, and is at times diffused with fourth-wave feminism or women of color feminism (Genz & Brabon, 2009; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Rottenberg, 2017).

Indeed, Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that rather than being anti-feminist, postfeminism simply refocuses earlier movements and highlights the importance of individual’s choice and empowerment, foregrounding the empowered feminine subject. Moreover, Gill (2017) suggests that postfeminism is best understood as a new sensibility that is visible in the media throughout. Both understandings, in general, do imply that after two hundred years of revolutionizing women’s rights progress, gender equality has been reached and feminism as it is can be put to bed (Osborne, 2001). Orloff and Shiff (2016) emphasize that a key prompter for postfeminist approaches is one particular perceived change: the idea that all women regardless of social differences face certain political and social exclusions, which has been a common thread to earlier generations of feminists, is no longer correct. Instead, postfeminism underlines freedom, choice, and agency; empowerment, discipline, and as many note, consumerism (Öchsner and Murray, 2018). Still, many a feminist finds the dismissal of feminism misguided, one of them being Fraser (2013), who argues that “it will not be time to speak of postfeminism until we can legitimately speak of postpatriarchy” (p. 158). The following section, then, identifies some of the most prevalent issues and debates of Western feminism today.

3.2.2 Issues and controversies of feminism today

If first and second wave feminists demanded rights as political outsiders, contemporary Western feminism cannot be said to consist of underground minority

discourse—some even argue it is quite the opposite. Formal exclusion and discrimination based on gender are outlawed, hierarchies and oppression have diminished, and both males and females can fill political and organizational leadership positions (Orloff & Shiff, 2016). As Goyal (2015) reflects, it is difficult to fathom why, in the 21st century, a need still persists to talk about empowering half of the population. Granted, substantial development has actualized in the West in the areas of equal opportunity to education, work and political life, and sexual rights. Finland in specific, according to the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, is a “gender equality pioneer” (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, n.d.). Yet, a number of issues are prevalent in the current discourse of gender equality. Furthermore, controversies *within* these issues have been risen to foreground by scholars and popular media alike. Three dimensions, and controversies on them, are briefly explored in this section. They are presented here based on observations on the current media and social environment, as well as literature such as the books by Schwarz (2017) and Redfern (2013). Naturally, current issues include, but are not limited to, the following topics.

First, the imbalance in leadership, wages and representation persistently makes headlines and spurs debates in the Finnish and international contexts today. On a macro level, females occupy a very modest portion of leader positions in both politics and the organizational world⁹. Female leadership, specifically, is emphasized because it is considered by many to make a positive difference. With this I refer not to a more symmetrical statistics—akin to the French *parité* (Fraser, 2013, p. 165)—but significant social and political changes (World Bank Group, 2014). It is particularly the notion of the numerical *parité* and its realization by regulatory measures that generate criticism. For example, electoral gender quotas are questioned for their effect on equality and the de-legitimation of the elected women (Krook, 2014). Further, leadership balance is a topic more complex than simply placing as many females in positions of influence as is possible. For instance, it is argued that a woman in charge does not automatically contribute to all notions of feminism¹⁰ or that every female wants to or is capable of working in positions of power. One can,

⁹ In 2018, there are 20 women holding the Head of State or Head of Government position, representing 6,3% of total number of international leaders (Women in International Politics, 2018). In the European Parliament, however, one third of the representatives are female (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017). In regards to the high-power positions of organizational world, it is noteworthy that over 95% of the CEOs leading Fortune 500 companies are male (Fortune; These Are the Women CEOs Leading Fortune 500 Companies, 2017).

¹⁰ For example, Sarah Palin, the former Governor of Alaska, left a lot to be desired for many feminists with their conservative comments about women’s rights. Palin, described as “a real woman - the way women are supposed to be” by one male supporter, is also characterized as “grotesquely underqualified, inarticulate to the point of incoherent, woefully uneducated not only about foreign policy but about politics in the ‘lower 48’” by journalist Lionel Shirver (2010, in Friedan, 1963).

moreover, go on to question the importance and virtue of power or financial success. From a more radical viewpoint, the concept of leadership in its current form is challenged altogether.

Second, the liberated body and sexual freedom are increasingly central in feminist discourse (Snyder, 2008; Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017). In fact, already in the early 20th century, American writer and editor Elizabeth Towne called for women to “abandon the sentimental idea of woman as embodiment of purity and moral virtue, to express their desires, and to insist that their wishes be met” (Tumber, 2002, p. 160). Yet it was the third wave of feminism that truly foregrounded this dimension in the mainstream discourse. Prevailing topics include sexual double standards¹¹, abortion and sexual health rights, and violence and sexual assault (Hlavka, 2014; Redfern, 2013). However, the embodiments of female sexual liberation in particular are a disputed topic. Author and journalist Ariel Levy’s (2006) book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* brings forth the concept of raunch culture. According to Levy, the postfeminist sexual liberation is, in reality, recreation of the ideals of sexualized entertainment. Further, Levy argues that what is labeled empowerment is mimicry of stereotyped hetero male preferences; wildness, atrocity, nudity, and doing “whatever men do” (p. 31). On the contrary to liberation, Dosekun (2015) concurs, this posits a “growing imperative for women to (hetero) sexually self-objectify” (p. 960). Barton and Marby (2018) call this andro-privilege, a phenomenon where culture conditions members to support hegemonic masculinity, and to strive to be “one of the guys” (p. 605).

The pursuit of sexual freedom also entails freedom from harassment. As many an aspect of feminism, the discourse around sexual violence has also spurred disharmony by critics of what is called victim mentality. For one, Halley (2006) critiques the framing of feminism as an underdog and women as eternal victims. Further, McCaffrey (1998) even argues that a phenomenon called victim feminism has emerged. As a movement, victimization is said to increase powerlessness and celebrate the victimhood. Whereas author Naomi Wolf claimed it a hindrance to positive development, social activist bell hooks considered victim feminism an issue of White supremacy. According to hooks, bonding around victimhood is the glue that holds together the (White) feminist anti-violence movement (McCaffrey, 1998). In other words, the subject matters of sexual safety and liberation are confronted on a range of dimensions.

¹¹ For instance, women are found to be reduced to objects in the sexual life and shamed for showing agency, i.e. manifesting their desires and needs (e.g. Hess, Menegatos, & Savage, 2015; Powell, 2013; Ringrose & Reynold, 2011). Correspondingly, men may be judged as predators in similar situations (Ringrose & Reynold, 2011).

Third, gender roles in the home and the workplace continue to be a frequently disputed theme. Dismantling stereotypes is increasingly topical in the Finnish context, according to the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (n.d.), as well as other Western states. For instance, Schwarz (2017) questions the role of gender and calls it a byproduct of societal norms and culture. More recently, this dimension has also incorporated the restrictive models laid upon men (Gaag, 2014). The issues related to gender roles include unequal division of domestic labor, expectations of femininity and masculinity, and assumptions about what is appropriate or preferable behavior to a man or a woman. Further, particular interest in gender roles has arisen due to recognition of the individuals identifying with queer and LGBTQ communities.

Finally, the theoretical understanding of feminism itself has spurred conflicts among feminist scholars. Today, mainstream feminism is critiqued for, to mention a few, its (leftist) political and neoliberal undertones. Indeed, neoliberalism and, in particular, the entwined empowered woman are fundamental ideas to the research at hand. Therefore, the conceptions of individualism and neoliberal feminism are further examined in the following section.

3.2.3 The neoliberal empowered feminist

“Neoliberal feminists” do not exist as a self-described group. Ferguson (2017) argues that instead, scholars have located the phenomenon in cultural and political environments by interpretive analysis. Indeed, a number of scholars agree on the notion that current mainstream feminism is interlaced with neoliberalism (e.g. Lakämper, 2017; McRobbie 2013; 2015; Rottenberg, 2017). What is under a debate, however, is whether neoliberal feminism is a legitimate feminist development constructed by the political individuals or a deviation from feminism that has corrupted the pure ideology. While advocates say neoliberal climate has resulted in women’s agency and freedom of choice, critics find that the same phenomenon runs on intersectional oppression (Eisenstein, 2017; Rottenberg, 2017).

Ferguson (2017) characterizes neoliberal feminism as a palpable feminist political ideology with three core concepts. First, it involves individualization of gender inequality. This entails that existing gender inequality is a result of individual choices, thus dissolving the significance of gender. Second, the measure of women’s liberation is considered as effective participation in capitalism. It embodies a discourse of individuals as disciplined “entrepreneurs of the self” (Prügl, 2015, p. 620) and implies that individuals should behave in ways that suit market principles (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2015). Rottenberg (2017) agrees with this notion, claiming that neoliberal rationality produces calculating and self-regulating,

entrepreneurial actors. According to Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017), neoliberal feminism, in response to inequalities, strictly frames them by rhetoric of economic independence. More, they argue that in the mainstream, the most celebrated feminists are those who are able to challenge structural inequalities and obtain success as individuals.

Third, according to Ferguson (2017), neoliberal feminism encompasses a privatization of political responses. Instead of collective political action, individual change is required. Consequently, argues Ferguson, “neoliberal feminism can only exercise a strong hold on the political imagination because it offers its adherents something that alternative ideologies do not, or do not any longer”. This “something” refers to pleasures such as conflict avoidance and indulgence in financial success. According to Prügl (2015), such pleasures are achieved by making individuals responsible of transforming themselves and their beliefs, and thus, reach gender equality. Gill (2007) connects this neoliberal subject to postfeminism in particular, suggesting that what encapsulates postfeminism—*notion of choice and being oneself*—axiomatically entails “a grammar of individualism” (p. 153). Respectively, Prügl (2015) maintains that neoliberalized feminism draws on a new rationale with its focus on individual choice, freedom, and empowerment.

Indeed, empowerment is a central notion in the neoliberalization of feminism (e.g. Francina & Joseph, 2013; Genz & Brabon, 2009; Gill, 2007; Goyal, 2015). Today, the concept of empowerment is shared by a variety of disciplines from economics and psychology to education and sociology (Francina & Joseph, 2012). In the “mainstream development policy and practice”, as Nazneen, Darkwah, & Sultan (2014, p. 55) phrase it, empowerment is defined as individuals being capable to understand and control themselves and their social, economic and political environments, as well as elevating their abilities and horizons to higher levels of achievement and satisfaction. Respectively, women’s empowerment entails the practices where women seize control and ownership of their lives. More, it incorporates the belief within women that they can act to improve their position both on personal and societal levels. Correlational features of an empowered individual include high self-esteem and critical awareness, feelings of self-efficacy and control over one’s life, decision-making power, and increased civic participation (Francina & Joseph, 2013).

Yet, empowerment in the context of women’s movements has been critiqued for a number of reasons. Due to its ambiguity, Eisenstein (2017) argues that empowerment is becoming an empty catchall phrase. Similarly, Gill (2017) calls the concept vaguely upbeat and fabricated to make feminism “cool” (p. 16). As a result, the term is seized for dubious motives and outcomes. As indicated in the preceding section, scholars such as Gill (2008),

Levy (2006), and Barton and Marby (2018) criticize the so-called sexual empowerment. They find that this version of empowerment, characterized by maximal coarseness, is a charade reproducing patriarchal sexual views through forged female agency. In this manner, empowerment not only bows to androcentrism but also co-opts consumerism. In fact, Rottenberg (2018) argues that empowerment is deeply interlaced with “commodity feminism” (p. 532). In the same vein, Eisenstein (2017) concurs, saying that NGOs and corporations utilize female empowerment as a means to increase profitability while seeming virtuous. Take for example the skin-lightening Fair and Lovely face cream by Hindustan Unilever, a subsidiary of the British-Dutch company Unilever. The brand, marketed in India, parades women’s empowerment by making their skin lighter¹². One of their advisory web page videos cheer, “A working woman needs to work hard and look presentable at all times, even after work!” (Fair and Lovely, 2015). “Fair & Lovely will give women the confidence to overcome their own hesitations & fears to achieve their true potential”, reads their web page (Fair and Lovely, n.d.). Indeed, the Fair and Lovely Foundation reports to have improved women’s independence through multiple career-supporting campaigns. Nonetheless, the foundational message that imitating a fair skin tone is empowering Indian women seems, at the very least, questionable.

The Fair and Lovely contradiction exemplifies yet another issue distinguished in empowerment-focused feminism. The empowerment approach highlights personal responsibility while failing to recognize the issues of existing power structures, argue Nazneen, Darkwah, and Sultan (2014). While some writers such as Kabeer (1999) denote that empowerment entwines individual change with structural change, empowerment is frequently considered to be agency-based and personal (e.g. Adjei, 2015; Eisenstein, 2017; Ferguson, 2017). Gill (2017, p. 16) argues this has inflicted a “confidence culture” (p. 16). According to Gill, confidence culture individualizes feminism and transforms it into a “gendered technology of the self” (ibid., p. 26). In this process, confidence, or lack of it thereof, is embraced as women’s principal hindrance. Simultaneously, claims Gill, patriarchal neoliberal capitalism and institutionalized sexism is entirely dismissed as an issue by academics, newspapers, and politicians. In consequence, confidence culture unites rather than challenges “capitalism and male domination” (ibid., 29). To exemplify, Gill argues that one of the areas

¹² At the same time throughout Western countries, Unilever’s Dove markets its beauty-enhancing products with “Real Beauty Pledge” and aims to “Taking concrete actions towards beauty inclusiveness for all women and self-esteem for girls” (The ‘Dove Real Beauty Pledge’, n.d.).

where confidence culture actualizes is confident mothering. In this context, women are imposed with the responsibility to alter their parental behavior instead of questioning the fundamental inequalities of parenting and the unequal division of labor. Indeed, the emphasis on individual responsibility is dividing feminists.

Lakämper (2017) denotes that choice-focused writings by privileged self-proclaimed feminists such as Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg are not helping. In their view, Sandberg turns structural problems into personal issues, thus enforcing rather than challenging the oppressing neoliberal structures. At the same time, the individualized feminism is critiqued for neglecting racial and socioeconomic issues in the line of white feminism. It seems, then, that such figures are repuked for co-opting neoliberal capitalism that seizes women as human capital, but also because their advice fails to assist less privileged females in becoming part of this human capital, neglecting the structural overhaul of issues such as gendered care work. This demurral is present in, for instance, McRobbie's (2013) criticism. Lakämper (ibid.) particularly reprimands books such as *Lean In* by Sandberg (2013) and *Bossypants* (2011) by producer and comic Tina Fey. According to Lakämper, they malevolently pose as faces of feminism while only representing a niche of privileged women. Lakämper argues that the teachings of the wealthy Facebook COO co-opts neoliberal postfeminism with their rhetoric of empowerment, thus neglecting feminist solidarity across racial boundaries. Further, cultural critic and feminist theorist bell hooks (2013) insists that "Sandberg's refusal to do anything but give slight mention to racialized class differences undercuts the notion that she has a program that speaks to and for all women." Additionally, failing to recognize their socioeconomic privilege, Sandberg is critiqued for neglecting the difficulties that less wealthy women encounter. Sangberg and Fey are, then, characterized as not identificatory figures for their contemporaries, and criticized for writing to a particular audience. Therefore, instead of enhancing solidarity, claims Lakämper (ibid.), privileged feminists ultimately cause alienation and isolation in their readership.

In conclusion, it is evident that according to critics, neoliberal feminism is a co-optation of capitalism and patriarchy. As a result, neoliberalism is viewed as an impostor on "true feminisms" (Ferguson, 2017, p. 223) (Fraser, 2013; Ferguson, 2017; Gill, 2017; Prügl, 2015). In contrast, writers such as Ferguson (2017), argue that neoliberal feminism is an existing variation of feminism and thus, must be denaturalized, analyzed, and criticized as a political ideology. This study refrains from examining the state of any "pure" or "authentic" feminism, and rather, seeks to analyze the developments of feminism through notions of self leadership and feminism. In addition, it highlights the political and human agency of

individuals who construct the very understanding of feminism as well as the society. Undoubtedly, such research itself “assigns meaning” to neoliberal feminism, thus construing the concept (Ferguson, 2017, p. 227). Next, the following chapter 4 presents in detail how these questions were researched.

Chapter 4: Data Collection and Methods of Analysis

This chapter is dedicated to the process of data gathering and the analysis techniques. The first section 4.1 illustrates the interviews conducted for this research. It is followed by section 4.2, which presents the participants of the study. Next, section 4.3 dissects the content of the interviews in detail. In section 4.4, the analysis methods are examined. The questions of ethics, reliability and validity are considered in section 4.5, and finally, data and analysis limitations of the are examined in section 4.6.

4.1 Interview Structure

As noted in section 1.2, this study examines the shifting feminism and society and in specific, the neoliberal elements of them. The main research question unravels as follows: “To what extent does contemporary feminism in Finland demonstrate neoliberal self-reliant agency?” In this manner, the study fills the research gap that exists on empirical studies of self leadership as well as individual understandings of feminism. To effectively investigate the “why’s” and the “how’s” of feminists’ approaches, it was necessary to be able to pose elaborating questions about their narratives. In consequence, interviews on the beliefs, actions, and understandings of feminists were selected as the data source for this study.

The data collection technique selected for this research is in-depth interview. In-depth interviews are a useful method when acquiring personal information about matters such as the self, lived experiences, and perspectives (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). They provide an effective tool within the Grounded Theory methodology for exploring complex and diverse viewpoints on a phenomenon. Specifically, the interviews for this paper are best described as semi-structured theme interviews with prearranged questions (Appendix A). The questions can be roughly divided into four categories, or themes: general understanding of feminism; individual accomplishments; individual failures; and specific questions on self leadership. Individual experiences, in particular, were prompted in order to incite personal descriptions of real life behavior. The objective was to identify the possible self leadership practices that the individuals themselves may not acknowledge. In addition, direct questions about self leadership and understandings of feminism were posed. Nearly all the questions were presented to each participant, but the order and depth varied. This method suited the context because each narrative was different and the topics were relatively intimate. Further, as

Metsämuuronen (2008) notes, this is an applicable approach when the number of interviews is low and the gathered data will be analyzed in depth.

4.2 Participants

As it is necessary to select participants with a clear frame, the group of interest for this study became self-identified feminists. Several methods were applied for finding suitable participants. First and foremost, the keywords “feminst” and “feministi” were used in online searches and the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook. Second, two eventual participants, publicly known as feminists, were suggested by the thesis group peers or supervisors. None of the participants were personally connected to or known by the researcher. In the selection process, two issues were considered. One ruling was that the individual had to be self-identified as a feminist in a definite way such as a notion on a publication, an interview, a personal social media profile, or a website. Evidently, as a result, the interviewees were all individuals who had stated publicly their feminist identity and were, to some degree, followed or in a position of influence. This was a noteworthy data characteristic and was acknowledged in analyzing the information. The second consideration regarded diversity. There was no requirement for one particular stance on feminist issues; nevertheless, variation was purposefully sought among the group. Therefore, each individual was compared to the other recruited participants in order to achieve a rich sample.

The participant group then matured into a diverse selection of seven interviewees. The group was diversified in apparent social, ethnic, or political backgrounds, and to some degree, their public stance on feminist issues. A sample of seven interviews was estimated to generate a suitable amount of data based on two reasonings. On the one hand, it is large enough of a sample to illustrate the phenomena in a diverse group of individuals. As an array, the interviewees represent different societal and ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, it is small enough of a sample for thorough, time-consuming coding and analysis processes. For Grounded Theory and for this study it is essential to inspect each interview carefully. Therefore, the data gathered was a good concord of the aim and the resources of this paper. Out of the final participants, five were contacted via public email. One was contacted through a social media channel with the help of a personal acquaintance. Another one was approached through a website messaging feature. During the process, two potential interviewees declined to the interview due to work engagements, one person declined because they did not want to

be called a feminist, and one person did not reply. In Table 1 below, the participants are briefly presented. Each participant has a pseudonym for the sake of anonymity in the later sections.

Table 1: Interview Participants

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Profession / Position</i>	<i>Method of Discovery / Selection</i>	<i>Method of Contact</i>
Amelia	Delegation member	Online search	Public email
Mia	Parliamentary Assistant	Peer suggestion, Twitter	Through a friend on Facebook
Nadja	Producer, Screenwriter, Author	Seen on media, online search	Website, personal email
Noel	CEO of an Association, Student	Twitter	Public email
Rita	Editor-in-Chief, Journalist	Online search	Public email
Irina	Journalist	Twitter	Public email
Aura	Researcher	Peer suggestion, online search	Public email

The participants of this study are Amelia, Mia, Nadja, Noel, Rita, Irina, and Aura. Within this group there were six who identified as females and one who identified as male. Six individuals were Finnish citizens with Finnish ethnic backgrounds, and one person was a second-generation Finn. The participants were aged between 26 and 44 years at the time of the interviews. In their interviews, Irina and Noel discussed the topics in the light of intersectional inequalities. Rita, however, was the only one distinctly identifying as an intersectional feminist. Amelia regarded their feminism to focus on women's rights, while Nadja, Mia, and Aura mainly discussed gender topics but also mentioned intersectionality. In the next section, I will describe in detail how the interviews were conducted with these participants.

4.3 Procedure

The interviews were conducted during the months of January, February, and March of 2019. The locations were selected based on the interviewees' schedules and needs, bearing in mind that the interview should preferably be in a relatively private setting. Two of the participants were interviewed at their workplace offices, two at a coffee house, two at a library and one in a university meeting room.

Each participant was interviewed individually, which according to Beitin (2012) prevents the participants from hiding or altering their opinions from other attendants. Granted, the method is also more susceptible to interviewees withholding viewpoints that may harm their self-image (ibid.). In specific, the participants of this study were aware that they were selected as "feminists" and therefore, they may have felt — and indeed expressed — pressures of being "an adequate interviewee" (Rapley, 2004, p. 16). As Rapley argues, this may result in an interview that more reflects the social encounter and expectations than the topic itself. In order to relieve such pressures, the participants were repeatedly reminded of issues of anonymity and confidentiality. They were also distinctly noticed about the start and finish of the recording. On occasion, the interlocutors demonstrated hesitancy regarding their anonymity. For instance, they made comments such as "Well, I guess I can tell *you* here.." or "Can I say this just as a *personal* opinion..?". Further, it was evident that the interviewees sometimes demonstrated apprehension in the face of topics regarding the self. For instance, interviewees were averse of describing their *leadership* in something but were much more comfortable describing that they were *an influencer* in an area.

During the interviews, the influence of the researcher was born in mind. As Ruusuvuori and Tiitula (2005) acknowledge, the interviewer is an active participant regardless of their perceived objective intentions. The interviewer affects the situation with their spoken language, form of questions, and other subtle ways. In the case of this study, the participants described some highly intimate topics and opinions, to which a natural reaction would be to show emotion or reaction. To most effectively avoid issues of subjectivity and researcher influence, an effort was made to not value the answers by expression and to not influence future answers. For instance, when a participant asked "Was that a good answer?" or "Was that what you were looking for?" I answered "That was a very thorough answer" rather than saying "Yes, it was a great answer". Indeed, reacting in an engaged but neutral way was one of the most important teachings in the interviewing stage.

At the end of each meeting, I restated how I was going to continue with the research and encouraged the participants to contact me if any questions were to arise. How I then employed the interview data in the coding and categorization phase is examined in the following section.

4.4 Analysis Methods

After recording the interviews on two mobile phones, the data was transcribed using the Express Scribe programme. Because the analysis was going to involve in-depth coding and categorization, every word was transcribed with the exception of repetition, partial words, and filler words. In addition, meaningful utterances and sounds were noted down. I started coding the data in the spring of 2019, then continued and finalized the process in the fall of the same year. For coding, the quantitative analysis programme Atlas.ti was used. I selected Atlas.ti because it is applicable for the type of coding I wished to do, and because Tampere University provides a licence for it.

The *open coding* process begun by reading an interview closely two or three times, line by line. While reading, phrases with significance for the research theme were sought. The questions asked of the data were such as the following: Does this explore the concept of feminism or self leadership? Does this represent or comment on neoliberalism? Is this a demonstration of leading oneself? Is this an argument against or for individualistic optimization? Is this a view related to the research theme? Could this reveal something else relating to the research topic? From the scope of these questions it is evident that at this phase, the dissection was highly flexible and open-minded. Once a significant unit of information was identified, it was coded with a descriptive phrase or a word. To exemplify the coding, Table 2¹³ below demonstrates a few open and axial codes.

¹³ All transcriptions have been translated into English by me as precisely as possible.

Table 2: Examples of Open and Axial Coding of the Data

Open code	Transcription quote
collective feminism	1:23 ..this advancement of equality is something that has to intersect the entire society, it's in both private and public sector, in the economy, at workplaces at home, in human relations in the law, I mean it is everywhere.
pressure to be a perfect feminist	4:37 Well, I constantly get those feelings of being a bad feminist. . .For example if I get some angry or aggressive feedback on a piece of mine where the person starts assessing my personal features or, somehow, uses inappropriate language, then if I was an ideal feminist 24/7 and an intersectional police then I'd always write an answer explaining why that kind of language and behavior is not OK and then analyze what generates this kind of behavior in the society and what sort of gendered violence your comment represents but I don't have the energy for that kind of hassle..
Axial codes	Transcription quote
SL: Behavior: self-observation	1:15 I am the kind of person who [observes their behavior] but in addition to that, it is necessary both in this profession and as a feminist.
SL: Reward: refocusing	3:16 ..every time I got a no-answer, it was always like, getting the wind kicked out of me, a painful feeling of 'you are worthless'. An usually it would ruin the rest of the day, but even in those moments, I was compassionate about my experience in that it is okay feel bad, getting that 'no'. I is okay to feel it but for half a day max, and then, I would start thinking that the 'no' is just a limit like okay, we're not going in that direction, or that direction either.
SL: Thought: replacing thought patterns	2:39 ..actually, maybe you could say I've done the sort of self leadership that I don't wallow in the.. That somehow I reflect on the situation and take responsibility of my own pissed-off-ness and bitterness, and that I won't start dissing someone else who's been given the grant, because that's something that you could do, too.

The objective of *axial coding* is to identify the relations and connections between categories. While Table 2 depicts open and axial codes separately, they were actually conducted simultaneously from the beginning. In fact, certain codes were naturally axial due to the setting of this study. Because self leadership principles are an essential category, and were relatively familiar one at the coding stage, they naturally formed categories and sub-categories. The three-leveled categorization is identical to the practices explained in section 3.1.3. As a result, an axial code such as “SL: Thought: Replacing Thought Patterns” occurs. Moreover, it was natural to axially code certain ideas immediately to clarify their meaning. Such a code, for instance, is “ISSUE: gendered professions”, which demonstrates a concept and its category.

Simultaneously with coding, the constant comparison method was applied by comparing each existing and new code with the existing list of codes. The objective of constant comparison was to critically evaluate the similarities and the differences between

codes. As is typical of the Grounded Theory method, the codes were initially rather repetitive. However, because the objective was to capture rich, diverse, and nondiscriminatory information, an elaborate set of codes were more a necessity than a concern. In order to apply the constant comparison method in coding, the questions asked were in the essence of “How is this code different from the similar codes X and Y?” and “Could this piece of information be coded within an existing category?”. In addition, to further clarify the codes and their relations, short descriptions were added to the comment section of each code in Atlas.ti.

Alongside coding and the constant comparison method, memos were written in order to clarify and expand on the ideas. Much as memo writing is integral in Grounded Theory, it was challenging at first to elaborate on mental categorizations. However, after learning to reproduce the arguments and reasonings in memos, the method proved useful not only for categorization but also for analysis. Next, here are two examples of memos attempting to expand on the coding and, simultaneously, constructing emerging ideas.

Table 3: Examples of Memos

CODE: Subcode	Transcription quote	Memo
ISSUE: Credibility of women	2:35 ..there are some studies on, for example, the saying that women should just ask for a pay raise and they'll get it and that it's their own fault if it doesn't happen. And I think it was a Harvard study where they concluded that women can't go ask for a raise with the same arguments as men. That they'll face these gendered conceptions; when a man goes in with the argument that they'd need a raise because they are just so good at what they do, it may work. But when a woman uses this individualistic argument and endorses and appraises herself, it doesn't necessarily work out and be well received. Instead, the woman has to wrap it in the idea that this is beneficial for the whole company and the community will benefit from it.	Are women not professionally credible (as societal expectation) or are they not personally convincing (which could be individually altered)? And should it? Societal structure or individual trait?
Toughness helps in succeeding	3:34 [Q: So in the beginning you said that feminism in your opinion refers to certain freedom and equality. Do you feel that you have experienced the reverse side, inequality, in your own personal life? As a female or otherwise? A:] Yeah, as a woman.. [0:08:26.9 pause 4 sec] Well, I've luckily always been relatively rough and so for example being a woman hasn't slowed me down and I have worked..	Correlation? Those who say they are tough/rough/dauntless also say that they have not been "held back" in the working world because they are women.

At the time when the coding was considered to be saturated to a satisfactory level, the final number of codes was 57. This was a result of extensive coding followed by merging and correcting codes until each code was distinct. Following the method of theoretical sampling, emerging concepts most relevant to the research topic were returned to and collected in the transcripts that had been coded earlier. Furthermore, selective coding was conducted by maintaining theoretical considerations of neoliberal feminism in mind the process of coding. The full final codebook with short descriptions is attached as Appendix B.

The data was analytically inspected simultaneously with refining the codes. However, once the code list was saturated, I examined the most prevalently occurring codes and studied the reasons behind such robust occurrences. In addition, I generated a code co-occurrence table in Atlas.ti in order to indicate which codes overlapped in which quotations. In essence, co-occurrences may indicate a thematic connection, which provide an interesting opportunity of analysis. The incidence scale of co-occurrences extended from 0 to 6 occurrences. For relevance, co-occurrences of 3 or higher were investigated thoroughly, eliminating the double occurrences that were a result of fragmented coding. These results are displayed in Appendix C. Further, I produced tables of all the co-occurrence quotes marked in Appendix C and memoed the relations and significances of each pair. Third and finally, the analysis proceeded beyond the quantitative tools of Atlas.ti. Following the grounded theorization tradition, the data was considered as a whole, maintaining in mind the research questions. In this manner, four core categories were formulated.

4.5 Ethics, Reliability, and Validity

Throughout this study, I have acknowledged the research ethics. Firstly, I have strived to be as objective as possible in choosing materials for the literature review, selecting participants, conducting interviews, and, above all, analyzing data. Secondly, from the first contact with my interviewees, I was honest about the objective of my research and the use of data. To cultivate confidentiality, I carefully consulted each individual about how much detail I may publish of their interview. The data material has been anonymized and saved on an external flash drive, and at the time of submitting the paper, the possibility of archiving the data in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive is explored. In conclusion, I have maintained integrity, ethicality, and a critical mind in this process.

I consider the reliability of this research to be on a relatively good level. Despite being an interpretative qualitative research by nature, this study has sought reliability through rigorous inspection of the data and careful interpretation in coding and core category formation. In consequence, the results can be similarly reproduced. In addition, I regard the results of this study valid.

4.6 Data and Analysis Limitations

The outcomes of this study must be inspected in light of certain limitations. First, there is a possibility of sample bias. I as the researcher selected participants on algorithmic platforms and in some cases, with the help of my acquaintances. Therefore, despite the efforts to conduct the research impartially, the sample might be distorted. It is justified to note, however, that given the nature of the study and the size of the sample, a perfectly representative or generalizable sample cannot be achieved. Second, the sample of seven individuals is limited. As a result, generalizations to large groups of people cannot be concluded. Nevertheless, the research does reveal authentic narratives which, it can be argued, disclose various existing viewpoints in current feminism in Finland. Third, the analysis is a theorization that relies on interpretation.

There were also certain imperfections in the interview process that must be addressed. At the time of the first two interviews, certain questions were somewhat ambiguous, and resulted in slight confusion. Subsequently, the questions were lightly reformulated for the following meetings. Even with these adjustments, characteristics that could be improved remain. Such issues, as listed by Ruusuvuori and Tiitula (2005), include softening the questions and formulating questions that allow excessive freedom to interpret. In addition to these weaknesses, however, the transcriptions also reveal the development of interview techniques throughout the process.

In future research, studying these themes with a larger and a distinctly random sample may provide intriguing, more generalizable results. For instance, expanding the sample size in a similar study could result in a more representative overview of Finnish feminism. Most certainly, a research of this nature could be applied to many other contexts, as well, and triangulation with material other than interviews is an opportunity. In addition, cross-tabulation of these samples may disclose intriguing connections between notions of feminism and a plethora of individual backgrounds and other characteristics and beliefs. Further,

coding and categorization with even more depth and time resources would certainly contribute to an even more advanced research.

Chapter 5: Analysis

This chapter illustrates the core concepts that emerged from the data and analyzes them, in particular, in the light of what is considered neoliberalized feminism. The first section, **5.1**, focuses in on the most occurring self leadership practice in the data, self-observation. Its subsections analyze self-observation as the groundwork of feminism, and its relation to stereotypes. Next, section **5.2** investigates the highly prevalent concept of internal boundaries, describing first how the less represented groups are encouraged to “lean in” and second, how they resist personal doubts internally. Then, in section **5.3**, we take a closer look at individual success and leadership within current structures. Notions of inspirational feminism and leadership are analyzed first, followed by an examination of perceptions of confidence. Finally in section **5.4**, the focus turns to the overall presence of “soft values” in the data, dissecting both individual and societal level concepts.

5.1 Self-observation

Self leadership practices emerged, to some degree, from the narratives of all participants. However, the occurrences appeared irregularly. Let us first inspect the practices that occurred in the data and an example quote of each code.

Table 4: Self Leadership Practice Codes Exemplified

<i>Self leadership practice (no. of quotes)</i>	<i>Coded transcription quote</i>
Behavioral: self-observation (26)	2:13 Yeah in these instances I [self-observe] a lot like if I recognize, in myself, something that I think is sexist thinking, then I reflect on it, where it stems from.
Behavioral: self goal-setting (7)	7:12 ..I had no support and no social networks. I was very alone but every day, I drew on paper, wrote on my diary what my plan is, and my future vision, and then I just thought like OK, now I’ve decided. Literally one moment, one day I decided that now, a change will come. And it did.
Behavioral: self-punishment (6)	1:12 ..anyway an extremely tough and uncomfortable mess, and I also had to deal with my own failures through and through like, how was I not prepared for the possibility that they would just pull the plug. Should I have..? Well, some say I couldn’t have. I myself think I should’ve taken that possibility into consideration, or, think what I could’ve done better so that they wouldn’t have done what they did.

Behavioral: self-cueing (5)	4:26 But I do have places where I focus better and ones where it is more difficult. . .Now at this moment I have my own work space at [company], it is this small cubicle but even that is really good because you clearly have your own corner and I have those books and materials and my plans there.
Natural reward: embedding tasks with intrinsic rewards (1)	2:51 ..when you can somehow maintain those, well, friendships even, on Facebook, on an informal level, that has been quite a significant thing, the community aspect. And what I've done quite a lot is I have had someone, not necessarily from my own field, but a dissertation writer who has sat with me in a coffee shop and we have written together. A different kind of community like, we work together although both are doing their own thing. But those kinds of things help maintain the motivation.
Natural reward: refocusing thoughts from disadvantages to advantages (7)	1:14 ..this will end someday, it will not last forever. Let's take one problem at a time like okay, now an employer breaks the law, let's deal with it. Okay now an employee, they lost it. They got a burnout/something, mental reason, okay let's deal with it. Or they got a sick leave okay, that means we have to reorganize. . .So that focusing on the concrete issues helped, as well.
Constructive thought pattern: self-talk (6)	6:11 Well, I've actually also used different kinds of mantras where you try to repeat to yourself something like, you're sharp, you can handle this, you don't have to stress about it -type things. And when you repeat it a couple of times, I don't know if there's any scientific proof, but I've thought that okay, it probably does no harm, either.
Constructive thought pattern: replacing dysfunctional beliefs (6)	1:16 ..you have to recognize things in your own behavior, as well, like why do I think this way or why, for instance, is this woman's laughter so annoying, like uhh, it pisses me off. Hold on, stop, is it somehow much more annoying than that guy's laughter or have I been programmed to think a high pitched voice as annoying? Like why does a laughing woman annoy me so much right now? Then again sometimes the answer is that no, that actually torments my ears because it is physically painful and sometimes it is like yeah, in reality there's nothing objectively annoying.
Constructive thought pattern: mental imagery (5)	7:25 I write a diary about things that trouble me. For instance, if I have to go and speak in an event, I'll write down beforehand what the main points are that make me wonder or hesitate or feel excited or scared. I write and think of each line for a couple of minutes and plan the situations a little bit. And whenever I do that, then the situation goes really well, or at least I myself am happy with the outcome.

As is evident from Table 4, most strategies appear in the data proportionally.

Constructive thought patterns occur in a comparable number of instances, and the same is true for the behavioral strategies of *self-goal setting*, *self-punishment*, and *self-cueing*. The natural reward strategies gravitate towards *refocusing of thoughts*, while *embedding tasks with intrinsic rewards* occurs scarcely. The most significant deviations are the behavioral strategy cases of *self-reward*, which is completely absent, and *self-observation*, which occurs robustly. It is likely that the practice of self-observation, due to its broad and simple self-reflective nature, was the most recognizable to the participants and led to further explorations in their narratives. On the contrary, the absent practice of self-rewarding, or the scarcely

appearing practice of embedding tasks with rewards, are more elaborate as strategies and, plausibly, simply less common.

The robust scope of self-observation in the data connects to a number of relevant concepts. These phenomena are examined further in the following subsections.

5.1.1 Self-observation as an Essential of Feminism

In self leadership, self-observation signifies awareness of when and why a certain behavior occurs. Manz (2013) described it as not only heightened self-knowledge but also, gathering information in order to change the behavior. What Manz (ibid., p.135) named the “lifeblood of self leadership” also proved to be essential to feminism, according to many respondents. Throughout the interviews, self-observation was regarded as not only a tool of feminism but a backdrop of the ideology. Rita describes it as a foundation of feminism:

I: ..do you pay attention to your ways of thinking, or to what you think of things or people or of yourself? Do you observe it?

R: Hm.. I am the kind of person who does that but in addition, it is imperative both in this job and as a feminist. . .And of course as a feminist, like we were talking, seeing and recognizing these different things in society, for example, is really important and a kind of a starting point for all development. So for that reason, you have to acknowledge aspects in your own behavior, too, like why do I think like this..

In this manner, a number of participants associated observing the self with observing the society as a whole. In a way, questions of society grew into questions of individual agency. The respondents portrayed themselves as an active part of established external structures. Aura denotes:

I: ..do you find this, self-observing, important for reaching feminist objectives?

R: Yeah of course, that you notice exactly where your own stereotypical tracks of thinking lie..

Noel, who considered feminism a methodological tool to fight inequalities, also connected the observation to acknowledgement and critical thinking:

I do think it's very important especially from the viewpoint that, you somehow acknowledge the typical defects. I would just be counterproductive and look very bad if we had an overpowering feminist

male leader. . . It would practically enforce that one specific role model and a harmful cliché which we are trying to contest. So yeah, you have to acknowledge it real closely, even in an overly explicit way perhaps.

These approaches of gathering information about one's own behavior, and efforts to alter it, echo Prügl's (2015) notion of the individual responsabilized to change their acts and beliefs to reach equality. Indeed, the participants demonstrated motivation to look inwards, assume responsibility, and in that manner, advance their feminist objectives. Yet, instead of altering themselves to suit the existing expectations and structures, the feminists in this case altered themselves to accommodate to their own *ideals*. That is, their objective was to think and act in accordance to what they thought was correct, "challenge my own thoughts" as Aura put it. What seems to be a neoliberalistic instrument was thus used for means that does not correspond with Prügl's notion. An example closer to that approach is, however, presented in the section 5.1.2.

From the preceding extracts it is evident that observing the self was associated with critical examination of how one acts upon their feminist beliefs. However, some respondents also demanded more critical assessment of not only the manifestation of feminist beliefs but also the way those beliefs are constructed. In specific, a critical examination of the ideology and movement individuals partake in was required by some. Amelia reflects:

I guess I'm wondering about this, self-critical way of thinking... I feel that perhaps feminism, too, needs it more... If you examine societal issues with a critical eye, you also have to look at you own ideology that way, constantly. Because somehow I feel that the world changes too fast. We are such a modernized society that social media has brought so many influences into this, information spreads fast and there are new changes constantly. We also need to examine ourselves more and make changes through shifts of attitude.

In addition to consciousness of the underlying beliefs, concern arose as to how to communicate those messages. Nadja conveyed criticism about feminist dialogue:

To exaggerate, [not discussing about different opinions] bothers both: these musty older men but also feminists, because the ideology, their own views of the world also blind them of dialogue.

Open and honest multivocal dialogue was regarded inherent to the concept of feminism. As a consequence, hindrances in discourse were found a particularly significant drawback. The

issues of feminist dialogue and selective activism particularly caused frustration for one respondent:

..I feel like they are living in a strange bubble. Like I said before, they very carefully pick out what they want to talk about. If you are an intersectional feminist, for instance, you have this motto of yeah, we speak for the justice of all people and particularly of those who are most vulnerable, but if you look more closely, they are extremely selective. . .I don't understand why we don't talk about the most gruesome issues in equality. Not at all. Some people have even sent me a DM like "Why do you speak about forced marriage. . .you might provoke the racists." And they are real feminists like you see everywhere: an intersectional feminist. I don't know how to communicate with them.

Notably, such criticism is contrasting to the image of neoliberal feminism in the light of Ferguson's (2017, p. 231) argument according to which neoliberal feminism relies on conflict avoidance and "getting along". One could also argue that it diverges from Fraser's (2013) portrayal of neoliberal emphasis on individual choice over criticism. Rather, it demonstrates a legitimate evaluation and critical examination of an ideology. Amelia further regarded this moment in feminist history as a transition phase, which is why self-observing and critical thinking was deemed to have particular importance.

Altogether, self-observation played a large role in the interviewees' views. Also related to self-observation was the topic of stereotypes and roles, which generated a great deal of conversation in participants. In the next section, the connection between self-observation and stereotypes and roles is examined further.

5.1.2 Stereotypes, Roles, and Self-observation

Stereotypes and roles were the most distinctly emerging issue out of the 16 identified issues in equality. With 24 occurrences, it was a notable topic. In fact, the different expectations and stereotypes applied on people was a commonly occurring definition of feminism among the respondents. Feminism was described as freedom from roles that guide people's choices, pressures of expectations, and damaging stereotypes. Irina recounts the following:

..these kinds of very basic experiences of having been treated differently in school or preschool or something. For example something like when you've been the loud and, to put it nicely, brisk child, and there have been a lot of boys in the class who've behaved exactly the same, but it's only my

behavior that causes problems and boys will be boys. And very classic stuff like this.

In addition, Irina mentions more aggressive experiences from adulthood and worklife:

Rather, you notice how people react to me, what they expect of me. What I have written a lot is this experience that many women share that they have been sexually intimidated since childhood, constantly. For example the gendered feedback I get on my articles. I don't think that many middle-aged or older male journalists get those "kill yourself you whore" messages.

Gendered roles and prejudgments troubled the majority of the respondents. These experiences of biased treatment were deemed a substantial issue, overcoming of which is a central goal of feminism. In these narratives, Rottenberg's (2017, p. 329) depiction of neoliberal and specifically post-feminist dialogue where equality "has already occurred, accomplished its goals, and is therefore passé" is certainly distant. Rather, the respondents described stereotyping as a persistent, long-standing, and collective problem.

On the one hand, problems such as gendered violence and negative stereotyping were a way to define feminism through the issues it is fighting. On the other hand, freedom from stereotypes was a way to positively frame and define feminism. Freedom from role expectations was an important objective for the majority of the respondents. In specific, breaking the roles signified empowerment in the forms of freedom of expression and acting fully on one's own potential. Indeed, such keywords adhere Prügl's (2015) understanding of neoliberalized feminism which entail emphasis on individual empowerment, choice, and freedom. These elements emerged strongly in the interviews. Flavor of neoliberalism could also be identified in the next interviewee's self-observation related to professional credibility:

..they feel like trivial little things but I do think of it. I also think about what kind of image I give of myself as a woman entering a room. Should I think, like when I enter a meeting and there are other ministers and unfamiliar people, high-ranking officials and such, about how I tiptoe into the room? And then I also reflect a lot, and observe myself from the angle that I don't want to give of myself a stereotypical.. That I don't want to be seen as a woman, I want to be seen as an expert, and the kind of political actor that you can trust in and that gets things done. So there are heaps of that sort of physical and subconscious.. And this is, in my opinion, also a little scary that I think about it a lot in my work, often.

Mia works in the political world. Aura, whose professional sphere is the academia, had a contrasting approach to expectations at workplace:

..when I observe my surroundings and I notice something like, that there are a lot of restrictions such as, an academic woman should behave in a subdued and controlled way or something, then I break those restrictions on purpose, like this one time I wore a glaring pink dress to a conference..

The role of a credible professional was discussed considerably in the interviews, a fact that is visible in the code co-occurrence results. The two “issues in equality” codes that co-occurred most (four instances) with self-observation were *ISSUE: Stereotypes and roles* (24 instances in total) and *ISSUE: Worklife: credibility of women* (10 instances in total). In this light, attention must be paid on the topic of women’s professional credibility. In connection with this theme, the self was observed for two different reasons. First, the respondents self-observed in order to block the automated assessment that traditionally feminine characteristics convey a lack of professionalism. See the notion by Aura:

..although I’ve been thinking about these things actively for decades, for like twenty years, I still notice that I catch myself, for example, not taking seriously the expertise of a certain type of woman in my head, and then usually, I already recognize that hey, why am I thinking like this, it’s fucked up to think like that.

Here, Aura demonstrates the optimization towards one’s own feminist ideals mentioned in the previous section. Second, some respondents observed and questioned their own characteristics in order to enhance their credibility at work. Mia narrates:

I do remember somehow consciously slowing down my speech rate. I usually talk pretty fast. And I tend to, well less these days and maybe this is also an interesting point, to laugh in the middle of my speech and, I just sometimes crack up in the middle of a sentence if I find something funny. And I remember that I somehow acknowledged as I went there that I have this tendency [laughs], just like now, and I consciously tried to restrain it. And I thought like this is, I don’t know, is it maybe a lighthearted characteristic that perhaps does not evoke confidence.

They continue:

I: Such internal observation, have you done it?

R: I have, very much so. When you ask like that, yeah, a lot. Well maybe it has changed a little, the way I do it because before I thought a lot about what others think of me if I behave this way. . . I somehow thought so much about how I should act in certain situations so that I a) gain a person's trust..

Evidently, such “lighthearted” characteristics, as well as what were considered “feminine” traits, generated internal observation. This is the clearer example of Prügl's (2015) responsibilized individual that I alluded to in the previous section. Mia observes and alters their “lighthearted” traits because they want to be perceived as a trustworthy expert. In addition, as Mia describes in an earlier excerpt, they do not necessarily want to be seen as a woman, but as a *professional*.

At the same time, the topic caused great contemplation and doubts. For instance, Mia was aware of the motivation to dissolve “womanly” traits at the workplace and questioned this habit. What “womanly” or “manly” features are and what they convey was a question on most interviewees' minds. In addition to observing the roles that others perceivably expected of them, the interviewees also scrutinized their own formation of stereotypes. Aura recounts:

..when I was watching a TV-show with a leading woman who annoyed me immensely and then I thought like, what is it about them that annoys me? And I realized that they didn't smile at all. And then I was like wait a minute, now I'm.. That this was one of those where women should smile, they should be really pleasant so that you could like them as characters and of course after realizing this, I started to look at them in a different way. I begun liking them a lot exactly because they broke the traditional pattern a little bit.

These reflections, I argue, resonate a climate of women's political agency. Whether that climate is a result of neoliberalism or not, the narratives convey that feminists do assume responsibility of the constructed reality. Instead of being reduced to mere victims of stereotypes, by self-observing the interviewees strived to resist and cease the stereotyping they were reenacting.

The findings of this section, then, are encapsulated in a figure adapted from Axelsson and Goldkuhl's (2004) GT Theory Diagram model. The following Figure 2 attempts to conceptualize the empirical data in a visual model that identifies the threefold structure of preconditions, actions, and results. The adapted model distinguishes internal and individual components from external and structural components, which is a useful distinction when examining neoliberal feminism. The significance of such sensitivity is exemplified by, for

instance, Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce's (2017) view, according to which the neoliberal feminist calls out inequalities but reacts to it by discourse of individualized entrepreneurialism. Let us now consider the figure below.

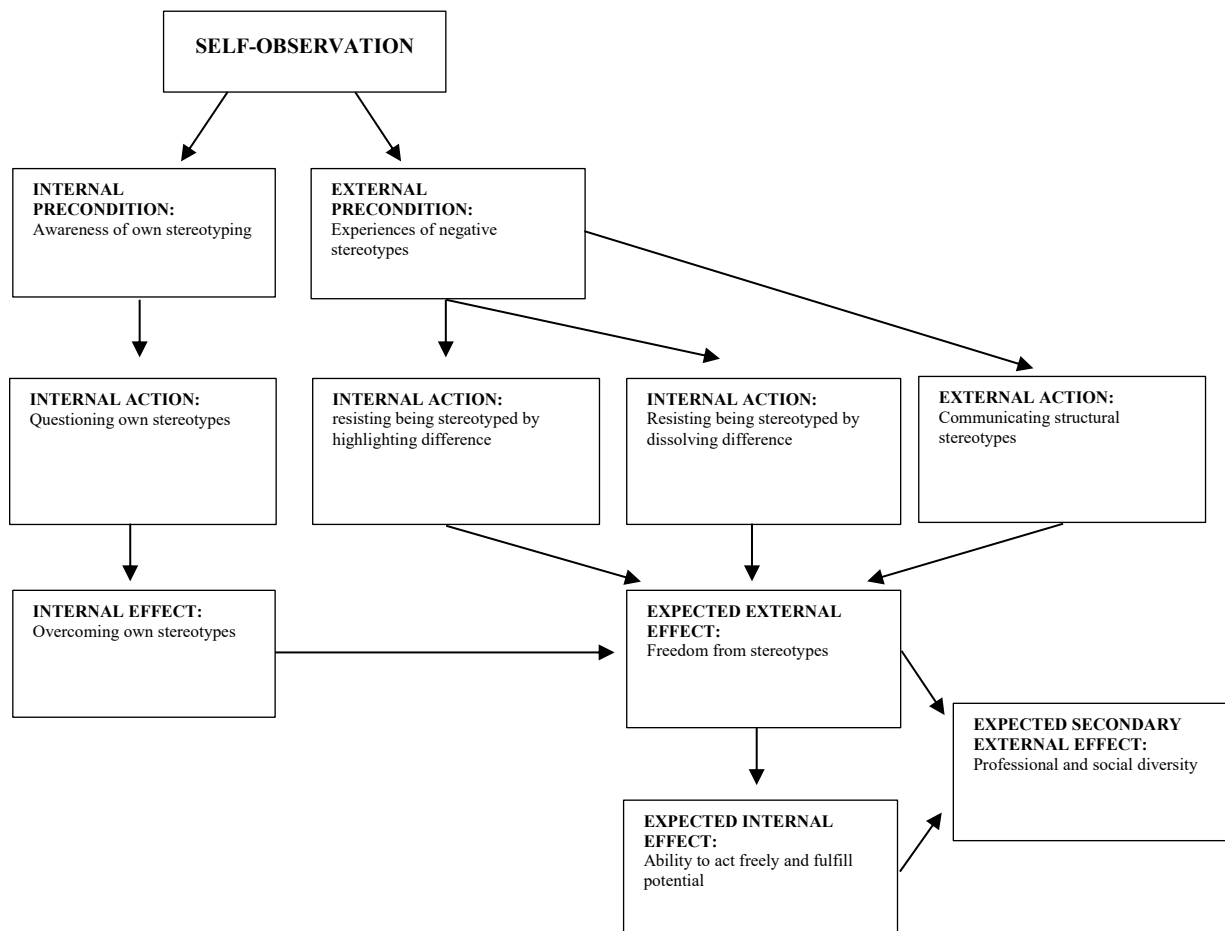


Figure 2: A Model of Preconditions, Actions, and Results of Self-Observation in Feminism

As the reader can observe in Figure 2, the participants attempted to solve both personal (internal) and structural (external) issues with actions that change one's own behavior. Structural progress was expected as the outcome of internal adjustments, which resonates with the concept of the neoliberal optimized self. Stereotypes, for instance, were resisted with such individualized responsibility. The interviewees observed not only their own deep-seated stereotyping but also, expectations from outside, and strived to resist those stereotypes in different manners. While some opposed them by challenging the caricatures of professionalism, others resisted them by dissolving the features that distanced them from

the expectation. In essence, observing and developing the self had become a way to control stereotyping and eventually, construct the society and reality.

In addition to the issue of stereotypes, many recognized internal boundaries that hinder one's choices and advancement. The following section analyzes these narratives.

5.2 Internal boundaries

The next core concept that emerged from the data is internal boundaries. They were, with a total of 16 hits, the second most prevalent issue distinguished in the narratives of respondents, outweighed only by stereotypes and roles. In addition to being central to the discussion of neoliberal feminism, internal boundaries were linked to many other dimensions of feminism. The following answer from Mia exemplifies the matter:

I: Do you think [discrimination at workplace] has somehow held back your advancement or reaching your goals or..?

R: Not necessarily held back but rather, I think for me it is more of a mental and personal thing, and I feel that it has had an effect on some areas and, for example, on what kinds of choices I have made in my life. When I think back now, then yes, a lot of things I could've chosen differently.

Further, Noel recalls that they “pretty much always have this certain consuming feeling of uncertainty”. Rather than gender discrimination, Noel considered these doubts to originate from other experiences of discriminative treatment. Doubts emerge particularly at work settings, as Mia describes:

..It was very challenging at first to speak confidently with the expertise that I have and discuss different issues. A simple thing like that was really difficult for me. . . This is probably partly my own, how would I say, insecurity in that I felt uncertain in the company of men, particularly older men and the kinds that I knew had been somewhere for a long time. And I would look at my male colleagues, who were the same age, maybe a few years older, they don't have the same problem. They go like hey, let's go for a “cuppa coffee”, and there I am, somehow boosting and psyching up myself for the situation like okay, now you have to say this and that thing.

In order to reduce this insecurity, the respondents noted that encouragement both in youth and in adulthood is significant. Further, they exhibited self leadership practices and even

what might be characterized as “leaning in” in the resistance of internal doubts. These two viewpoints are examined in the sections below.

5.2.1 Encouragement: How to Fix the Way Women are Raised and Praised

As a source of internal limitations, many participants alluded to the way individuals are raised and encouraged in youth. While the intentions of adults are good, Nadja argues, the manner of encouragement may negatively affect how girls advance later in life:

Yes, women should be encouraged. But with this, too, we can go from bad to worse with how we encourage. . .we have to learn to encourage women because we have not. We haven’t encouraged girls through action. We have praised them when they have managed to put on the dress they got from grandma. We have praised them for acting nice at parties and taking care of our siblings. We are encouraged to do that, but not to really act, to go out there and advance.

It is this ability to try and to fail confidently that Nadja finds significant. They conclude:

Boys are encouraged to try, to act, and to fail. The most important thing regarding success is that you dare to fail many times before you succeed, because one will fail. So, girls have this certain... They are so scared of failure.

Many interviewees shared this demand for changing the way girls are brought up. In addition to school and other social contexts outside the home, the importance of family in this matter was highlighted. Eva describes how the family can discourage one from making choices:

There has to be a secure adult that says, hey, be brave. . .If the girl is clearly right then someone has to say, you’re right, make the decision. You are the expert of your life. But no-one told me. At this age I recognize that okay, I wasn’t the only person who felt that I lacked the safe adult who would confirm to me that hey, as a girl, you are up for anything.

Besides criticizing the manner in which women are brought up, the interviewees found that encouragement to act bravely in adulthood has its place, too. As Irina notes:

I: Do you think that women should be encouraged to act more boldly?

R: Well I think so because I feel that many women share the experience that they have not been encouraged too much when they were young. I

don't know, it's very impressive how, from many sides, and in different and the most imaginative ways young women can be told that they are somehow bad or unsuitable or dumb or unqualified or whatever.

While not deeming it the all-embracing path to equality, all respondents agreed that women—and other groups experiencing similar internal boundaries—should be encouraged to act more boldly in the society. This encouragement and empowerment, even, resonates with the critical portrayals of “leaning in”. In Gill’s (2017) view for instance, focus on encouragement overshadows the awareness of and demands against structural problems. According this approach, the main hindrance to equality is falsely regarded to be women’s lack of confidence. The criticism thus seems to rest on the assumptions that a) the lack of confidence is presented as women’s own fault and problem and b) trying to increase this confidence overshadows any other criticisms of social structures. However, these assumptions are not in accordance with the data where, in unison, the respondents found that gendered internal doubts stem from outside stereotypes and treatment. In addition, such boundaries were not by any means regarded as the main issue in equality but surely as an aspect to take into consideration.

Nevertheless, it is justified to say that there is a neoliberal essence to the narratives regarding self-doubt. For instance, Prügl (2015) regards transformation of beliefs to be privatization of political responses and thus, neoliberal feminism. Moreover, Gill (2017, p. 16) argues that neoliberal feminism entails a “confidence culture” where the lack of individual confidence is perceived as a principal hindrance to equality. The next section presents perhaps clearer examples of similar neoliberal undertones.

5.2.2 Self-talk and Replacing Thought Patterns: “Just Do It”

The narrative of individually overcoming personal limitations was evident in the data. Consequently, *ISSUE: Internal boundaries* co-occurred with *Individual proactivity advances success* in four instances. Specifically, as tools for surmounting such doubts, the respondents recounted several self leadership techniques. In addition to self-observation, internal boundaries were contested with self-talk and replacing thought patterns. What is more, some respondents had hurdled their doubts by self-talk and “just doing it”. Mia describes:

I also think a lot about what kind of physical gestures I use—and of course in this job it's a typical situation that a meeting takes place while having lunch or breakfast—for example; how are you eating, are you guzzling, do you look like you're starving, these kinds of completely trivial things of

like, what kind of image you exude. Then at some point I thought like well, we're not in Victorian England now, you don't have to sit legs crossed like girls in church.

Similarly, Aura recounts self-talk:

Well, I still experience constant impostor syndrome. I always feel like I should basically be ashamed and suffer. For example after an interview I'm like what did I babble this time, but I have somehow outsourced it so that I think like, that's the patriarchy sitting on my shoulder and trying to silence me. [laughs] So it helps me to conceptualize things or name them.

The “just do it” mentality was regarded as helpful by those who experienced internal doubts. In addition, some told that they found it helpful to attain certain characteristics they considered to be more exhibited by men. Here, Aura sarcastically recounts a method of battling internal boundaries as follows:

I think this kind of peer reference thinking is a good tool, as well. Or sometimes the comparison works so that you look at some.. Well, sometimes these professor men for example may speak without that much specific expertise on the topic but are still able to present well. Those are also good references where you are like. . I have actually read up on this so I can probably speak about it if they can go without even familiarizing themselves with it!

The discussion of obtaining characteristics described as traditionally “masculine” was not merely ironical, however. Certainly, many “masculine” traits were regarded useful and necessary for all individuals, as will be evident from the following sections. With respect to internal boundaries, some respondents compared women's exhibited confidence with that of men. For example, Mia says:

I: ..do you feel like women should be encouraged to act more boldly in the society?

R: Of course because men act boldly, too. And now I said it myself: not all men..

Therefore, boldness as a useful trait—considered as more exhibited by men—was advocated. Now, questions may arise on these views of “masculinity” and “femininity” in these narratives of respondents. These concepts are further discussed in the final analysis section

5.4.2., and are therefore not analyzed further here. What is considered in this section, however, is the matter of the neoliberal undertone that emphasis on confidence carries.

It cannot be dismissed that these views echo Gill's (2017) notion of confidence culture. In particular, the fact that self leadership strategies were frequently used to enhance personal beliefs of capacities resonates with the idea of "gendered technology of the self" (ibid., p. 26). According to Gill, confidence culture consolidates "male domination" and the existing structure by forcing personal changes on those whose characteristics do not suit market principles. Furthermore, many accounts bore a quality of the disciplined "entrepreneur of the self" (Prügl, 2015, p. 620). Respondents conveyed experiences such as: "...I feel that this is a great thing and I've been able to show myself that when you just do it, you can go far and you are able". Moreover, Aura depicts:

Even noting that well, this is the impostor syndrome, helps to understand that it isn't only me, that this is a commonplace phenomenon and many of us, in a way, suffer from it and that is one way to.. But yeah, of course there is continuous doubt. But then you just do it anyway.

In conclusion, the interviewees were highly aware of existing internal boundaries. What is more, they acknowledged numerous ways of managing them both within themselves and in people around them. In the following Figure 2, the notions of this subsection are gathered in an adapted Theory Diagram.

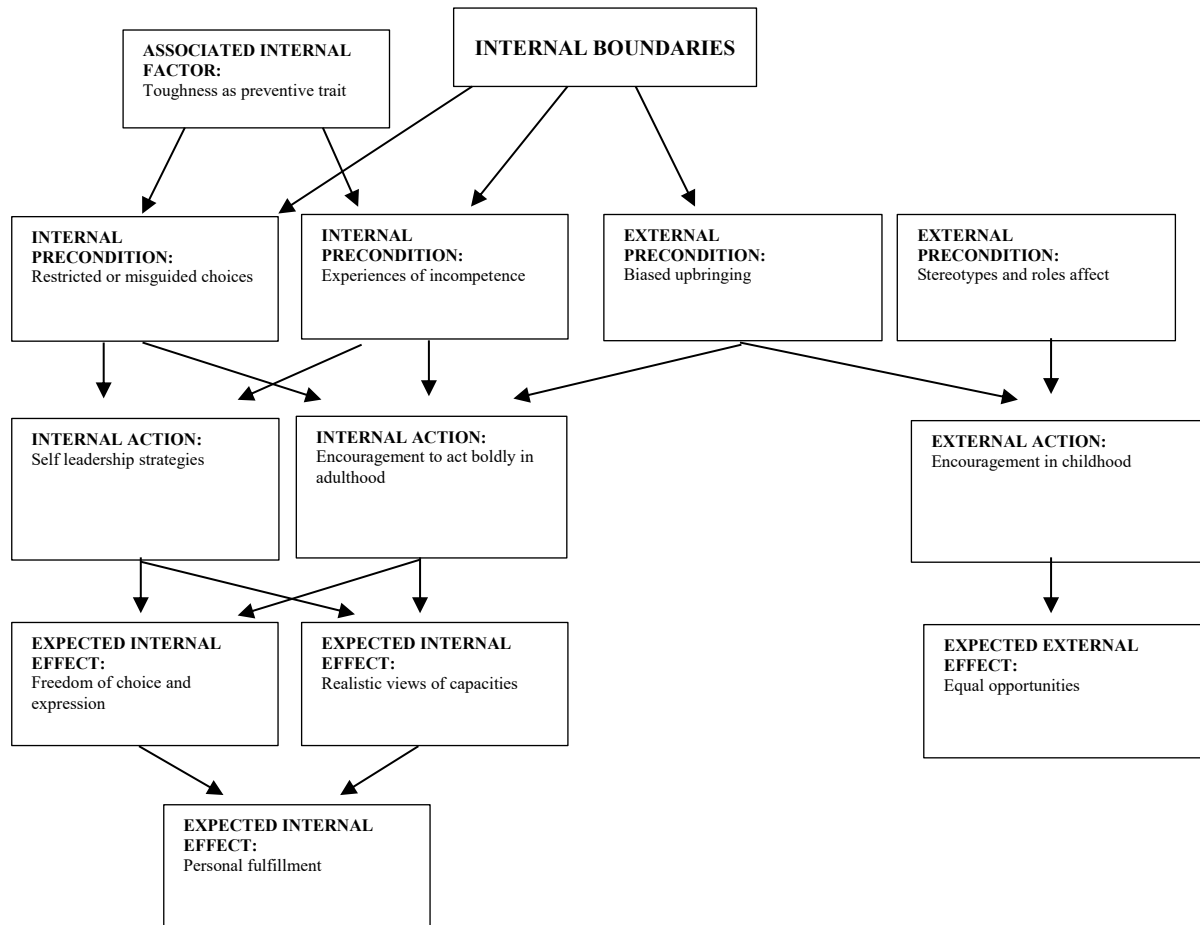


Figure 3: A Model of Preconditions, Actions, and Results of Internal Boundaries in Feminism

Figure 3 presents internal boundaries and the process of managing them. The participants who described themselves as tough found that their personality suits the prerequisites of succeeding professionally. Nevertheless, all participants recognized the internal and structural dimensions of internalized doubt, and individualistic techniques of encouragement were widely used to contest them. Concurrently, the issue was perceived to lie in broader stereotypes and upbringing and hence, wider changes were demanded in the ways people are encouraged and taught in youth. The internal actions and assumed responsibility reflect neoliberal development to a certain degree. Yet, these notions co-exist with criticism about structural problems.

Internal boundaries were regarded problematic for individualistic reasons but furthermore, for the diversity of leadership. Next, chapter 5.3 explores the topics of success and leadership.

5.3 Success and leadership for multi-level causes

Leadership and economic success are central concepts of the perceived neoliberal feminism. According to the critics, neoliberalization has entwined feminism with the capitalist equality measure of individual economic achievements (Thorpe, Toffoletti & Bruce, 2017). The first subsection of this part analyses the understandings of women and the less represented individuals in leadership. The participants found a high value in such leadership, but for the progressive results rather than as individual triumphs. The second subsection analyzes the individual experiences of success from a feminist viewpoint. It examines the interesting notion of “toughness” that emerged, disclosing a discrepancy between reality and beliefs.

5.3.1 Inspirational Feminism and Leadership: Paving the Way

The interviews on all accounts conveyed that seeing women and other less represented individuals, such as minority members, succeed is important. Coded experiences of inspirational feminism co-occurred with *PATH TO EQUALITY: Encouraging individual action* in four instances. Encouragement, inspiration, and leadership were considered relatively valuable by all respondents. Rita describes:

..I looked at people in Finland that I admire so much, people who had created [the event], which I thought was a fantastic idea. And many of the participants were the kinds of feminists that I look up to and who I consider to have done a great and meaningful job, in new interesting ways, who I sort of consider to be, if not in leadership position but, powers taking the ideology further. And then I thought, well if them, then hell! Why don't I do it myself, too.

They continue:

I don't know if this is feminist leadership I'm not sure, but how I see it is that someone has to do it. . .Clearly there was a massive need, people needed [the event], they craved it and they loved it, and all that was needed was that someone acts. And then we just did. I don't think leadership has to be more than that, you just have to do it and people will come and start acting themselves, too, when they are inspired.

In these excerpts, Rita depicts the value of inspiration for feminist developments. Many a participant similarly told of instances where they observed and admired someone achieving success and felt empowered. "If they can do it, then I can, too", recites Aura.

Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017) argue that in neoliberalized feminism, the most celebrated feminists are the ones that have bypassed structural discriminations and reached personal success. Consider now Mia's experience of leadership as an inspiration:

I've had terribly good bosses during my time in this political party context. . .and it has been really empowering to notice that your bosses, who have walked the same path before you, know terribly well what kind of situation you are in as a young woman who has embarked this career path.

On the one hand, this excerpt echoes Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce's (ibid.) view of celebrating those who have prospered in the ruling structures. On the other hand, to argue that someone's professional or economic success was appraised as a principal feminist triumph would be unjustified. Inspirational success was not understood as strictly economical accomplishments but also social and societal achievements that lead to larger, collective benefits. Yet, there was certain value found in individual, personal achievements, too. The interviews revealed two principal reasons for why individual successes and leadership positions were deemed significant.

Mia's previous excerpt exemplifies the first argument. The interviewees found it meaningful to have examples and peer support by others who have succeeded in their craft. Here is Irina's account:

In a way, I think there is definitely room for encouragement. . .but the kind that influential positions are held by different aged and various types of women who get things done and are qualified and go for it.

In this manner, leadership was regarded potentially empowering, inspirational, and exemplifying for other individuals. Noel comments with a similar emphasis:

..if a person doesn't consider themselves very extroverted or forward or doesn't want to be a organizational leader then they don't have to do it only for some kind of societal objective. . .but generally speaking yes, like I mentioned about the example that it would be important to show. . .that woman, just like any gender, can be a manager.

In a way, these notions demonstrate that the interviewees value success in the existing societal organization as an opportunity that all must have. One may ask whether there is connection here to Ferguson's (2017) claim that neoliberal feminism outlines equality as effective participation in capitalism, and supports the present neoliberalization. The previous passages demand an equal opportunity for all to succeed in the existing realm rather than challenging it. Yet in contrast to Ferguson's assertion, no respondent argued that economical or political success and leadership would be the only and comprehensive measure of equality.

The second argument for the importance of leadership was representation; the idea that diversified leadership is followed by thorough and inclusive decision-making. Further, many regarded achieving organizational and political power as a necessary way to *change* the hegemony. For this reason, diversity in all influential positions was deemed necessary. When asked about whether women should hold more leadership positions, Irina said:

On the level of society and structures, I think that more of all kinds of people should be in leadership positions, just like we should have more of all kinds of people as politicians or police officers or journalists because it's always harmful, in a position of power, to have the influential people from a homogenous group.

Amelia answered in a similar vein, referring to how diverse backgrounds affect decisions:

Absolutely yes. . .men and women are truly different because women are currently at home, prepared to do more care work, mothers take care of their children at home more. These kinds of things affect the mind very much. If we have this sort of person who has done a lot of care work in an influencing position, then they can also empathize with those in a poorer position, attend them better.

In consequence, leadership and influence were perceived as significant factors in equality. This understanding was also related to the position that the interviewees themselves occupied.

As noted before, all participants had an audience larger than the average person due to their different positions of influence. To many, these standings brought an emphasized responsibility. Communicating the issues was perceived as their individual path towards reaching equality. Irina describes:

..I do have responsibility, and a pronounced responsibility as a journalist and as someone with the space to express their thoughts and opinions and make things visible. So in that way I have, both as a private person and as a journalist, responsibility of what kind of things I give space to in my work and which issues I want to bring up.

Consider in addition Rita's opinion:

..[equality] is everyone's responsibility, but because I'm in a position where I have the channels to speak and the opportunity to reach an audience that maybe other people don't, then of course there's added responsibility.

Evidently, Rita along with other interviewees acknowledges their position and opportunities of influence. The participants altogether demonstrated awareness of their fortunate situation and wished to make use of it well. This finding does not reproduce Lakämper's (2017) argument according to which current neoliberal feminism neglects socioeconomical differences. In this view, individuals are assumed to have the same opportunities and they are simply expected to succeed based on market principles. In contrast, the participants throughout were conscious of their social and economical advantages. Further, they found that those without such privileges could and should be accommodated to in a privileged position like theirs.

As they felt responsibility and had an audience to convey feminist ideas to, numerous respondents felt that feminism was a part of their identity. Many a participant found that they had found their place “in the feminist conversational canon”, as Nadja phrases it:

I feel like I have kind of found... Of course this is just something I thought up but, this feminist conversational canon, I feel like I can find my place there and that is to speak in everyday language, perhaps a humorous language hopefully, of these issues.

Similarly, Mia reports to feel a strong personal ownership of striving towards feminist objectives and Noel states that they have found their place in the field of feminist action. Altogether, the respondents shared the identity of feminism as a part of their public character, a theme in their work or publications, or a tool in their everyday life. In this case, of course, feminism as such part of personal identity is connected to the sample selection. Therefore, general conclusions about the way feminism is not only a political ideology but also an identity marker cannot be drawn from this sample. This may be a fruitful topic for future research. Furthermore, how being a public self-identified feminist affects view of feminism poses an intriguing question for further studies.

In describing the paths to their current disposition, the participants portrayed interesting facets. What emerged specifically was the concept of toughness. In the next section, the meanings of toughness and resilience are examined further.

5.3.2 Tough Ones Succeed

Reflections on toughness were entwined with the narratives of achievement. The code *Individual proactivity advances success* co-occurred with nodes describing *toughness* in six occasions, making it one of the most numerous co-occurrences. Those individuals who expressed being particularly hard-nosed, confident, and tough, also felt that they hadn't been personally held back by inequities. Nadja narrated this phenomenon:

I: ..do you feel that. . .you have experienced inequality in your personal life, as well? For example as a woman, or otherwise?

R: Hm, as a woman.. [0:08:26.9 pause 4 s] Well luckily I've always been pretty reckless so that I haven't been slowed down by womanhood, for example I've worked..

Likewise, Irina reflects:

Some think that I've pursued different kinds of positions quite confidently. So if I have been asked for a job or a gig, I've never not gone because I'd have had thoughts like, I wonder if I can do it. Or like in that way it is all feminist that I think I have no reason to start blasting myself, that people do this kind of work and that's it.

Irina also mentioned that men are said to pursue jobs with more confidence and added, "perhaps that is more the kind of attitude I have towards working". Despite the apparent connection to Gill's (2017) conception of confidence culture, which I have alluded to in several sections, the interviews did not quite resonate with that. Whereas the findings do suggest that many individuals found toughness beneficial in achieving their goals, they simultaneously insisted that it should not be a prerequisite for success.

Nevertheless, it is noticeable that the interviewees described to have gained professional respect by exhibiting tough characteristics at the workplace. Amelia denotes:

..at work I get a lot of feelings of achievement because somehow, based on my looks, people imagine that I'm very agreeable. Of course I'm always smiling and they go "Oh, our young [name]!". I am the youngest nurse in the team. On the other hand, I am very competent at my job, very tough and systematic, and that way I've gained a lot of respect.

They go on:

I know with these human rights questions, I know that some people try to dismiss and silence me. I don't know why, but I get my kicks from that like okay, I'll do better, I'll go further. I doesn't discourage me. I don't know, maybe I'm competitive.

The experienced personal success through toughness did not eliminate the interviewees' requirements for structural changes. In particular, Nadja, Rita, Mia, and Amelia self-described as "reckless", "tough", "audacious", "competitive", and "used to confrontation". They also expressed appreciativeness to possessing these qualities. For example, Amelia described having been able to defend their colleagues from bigoted treatment because of personal assertiveness.

Yet, none of the respondents claimed that all individuals experiencing inequalities should just "be tougher". See for instance the following exchange with Mia:

I: And you said that you are used to holding your own, but do you think that some people might be held back by [discriminative behavior] in another way..?

R: Yes! Absolutely.

I: ..than you?

R: Absolutely and I don't.. I think it is horribly dangerous if the equality discourse becomes like, ladies, hold your own, be stronger, somehow. You can't assume that when we have a clear structure there of how women advance and how men advance.

Mia also criticises that the discourse on feminism, particularly by those not identifying as feminists, often reduces into urges to "just get it done". Noel's comment has a similar tone:

I: Do you think that women should be encouraged to somehow act more confidently in the society?

R: Hm, to some extent, yes. But we have to remember here that in feminism today, we are trying to disconnect from the idea that we only have one type of female and that we'd like to replace the traditional type of female with a new character that is a bold entrepreneurial woman or a leadership-type woman.

Such comments not only by Noel and Mia but all respondents convey that their feminism goes beyond the individual. It disagrees with Prügl's (2015) portrayal of the new neoliberal rationality which underscores individual empowerment over demands of structural changes. First, those who identified as tough described it as a personality trait that helped them advance in the current organizational and political structures. Yet they rather questioned the way these structures operate than demanded others to "become empowered" in the form of hardening themselves.

Second, the entire concept of toughness and its relation to power and success was questioned. For example, Mia reflects:

R: Maybe it's about empowerment, and that empowerment cannot happen only between women like, now we'll try to be tough as hell, rather it happens.. And this, that I'm using the word "tough", it is somehow..

I: Yeah.

R: Yeah, I don't know.

The respondents demanded structural and cultural alternatives of operation. That is, they called for diversity in the valued characteristics and portrayals of professionalism. In essence, this conflicts with Rottenberg's (2017) idea of neoliberal "accommodating feminisms" (McRobbie, 2013, in Rottenberg, 2017, p. 330) which submit to the competitive, traditional social organization. In Rottenberg's view, neoliberal feminist solutions avoid argument and confrontation, opting to create a fabricated balance within the structures, and by the structure's rules. While the findings do not support such rationale, they also differ from Rottenberg's and others' radical, if you will, demand for structure-level changes only. While demanding societal shifts, the interviewees did not entirely dismiss the value of internal adjustments.

This dual narrative intersecting individual and structural changes was prevalent in the interviews. Amelia, who stated their tough attitude above, finds that inequality is both a structural and an individual issue, but that influencing structural inequality is more substantive. Correspondingly, Aura comments:

..I think it is an on-going, twofold task, so of course individuals have to be encouraged to act but we also have to think about how these structures can be unraveled. How we can both as individuals and collectively dissemble the structures.

Accordingly, Mia calls for formational changes. While some shifts can be achieved through legislative changes, others require a more intangible change in attitudes and culture. As many interviewees note, such transformations compel individual work. Mia argues:

..it's observed already at a very young age that gender-identity affects how capable or competent you consider yourself. For that reason I think that it takes fundamental societal change, and it doesn't necessarily work to.. Legislation can be a very good tool but when you think, for instance.. Well, right now there is the pregnancy discrimination, how women are faced in the working life, what opportunities they have to advance professionally or in society in general.

Noel has similar views on the multi-leveled nature of work towards equality:

It is a horribly complex thing, how we.. Whether our language is sexist, that isn't necessarily a legal issue but rather a cultural one, and something people should intervene with their own behavior. Then again, if we consider hirings or whether blatant racism is OK, then we are talking about legal questions.

In conclusion, toughness contributed to many participants' experiences of professional success in the current climate. Nevertheless, the respondents deemed that it should not be a prerequisite for success, or even leadership, to which they demanded more diversity. Figure 4 below captures the themes of this subsection in an adapted Theory Diagram model.

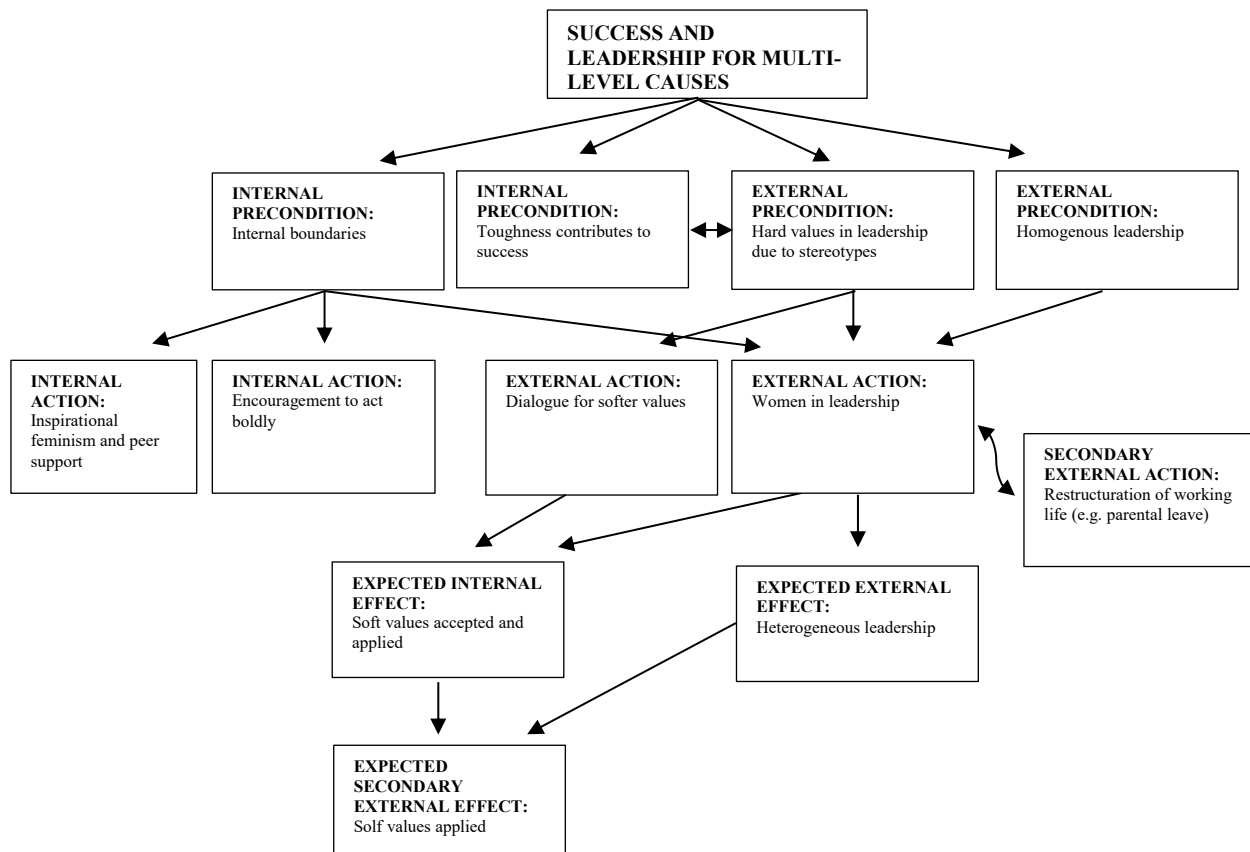


Figure 4: A Model of Preconditions, Actions, and Results of Success and Leadership in Feminism

Figure 4 visualizes feminist understandings of leadership and success. There was a general consensus on the problematic values that guide current leadership. For one, structural hindrances to diversifying leadership were distinguished. In addition, internal boundaries were estimated to reflect such structural hindrances. The participants suggested both internal and external solutions to these issues. Here, the internal and external actions have contrary

effects but rather than being conflicting, they are approaching a middle ground of values from different directions. The phenomena, perhaps, reflect a partially neoliberalized understanding of what professional life requires.

An emerging requirement for leadership and society in general was an increase of 'softer values'. The next section, then, focuses on these approaches.

5.4 Emerging soft values

The following, final analysis chapter dissects the emergence of softer values in the findings. Out of all core categories, this one diverts from the concept of neoliberal feminism most distinctly. Intuitively, it conflicts with the image of an individualistic, privileged, calculating movement that Lakämper (2017) and others have portrayed of neoliberalized feminism. The following chapter takes a closer look at these emerging concepts. First, findings about soft values on societal level are introduced in the first section. Second, notions about interpersonal and individual soft values are presented in latter section.

5.4.1 Intersectional Care and Controversies

The feminists in this study demanded more soft values into the society. The term “soft values” here signifies an emphasis on community, multivocality, negotiation, and inclusion, as well as rejection of competitiveness. Primarily, it must be said that terms such as “soft values” and ‘hard values’ may establish an impeding binary that carry more meaning than they are intended to. For instance, Jubas and Butterwick (2008, p. 521) argue that in discourse about professional skills, “soft” and “hard” are “discursive clues about the role of gender in this arena”. However, I selected the term “soft” because I found it most comprehensive for this purpose. Let us now examine further what the term consist of in these findings.

In the discourse altogether, there was an emphasis on taking care of others. Foregrounding these elements was particularly common for those interviewees who identified as intersectional feminists. One of those interviewees was Rita:

[Feminism] is radical equality not only regarding gender but also [0:00:47.6 pause 4 s] other things. So, I consider myself an intersectional feminist which means that while the battle for equality must be fought so that genders will be equal, we also have to achieve equality for, for instance, people of different colors, disabled people and abled people, people of different ages and other factors. They should be offered the same opportunities in life.

The respondents were motivated and felt responsible to fight for the rights of those that faced discriminations which did not touch them personally. Noel notes:

..I can't be a spokesperson for the racialized because I don't have the experience of how societal structures might oppress me, for example,

because of the color of my skin. Therefore I feel that I'm responsible for helping others to be leaders and in charge of those things, and in any way I can, to support them.

In this way, participants expressed responsibility to defend people who are discriminated against in any measure. This was the case regardless of whether the participant identified as an intersectional feminist or not. In these narratives, the interviewees are distanced from Lakämper's (2017) views on privileged self-identified feminists. Lakämper argues—particularly pointing to writers such as Sandberg—that individualized, neoliberal, white feminism disregards racial problems. Based on the findings of this study, issues such as racial discrimination or bigotry based on sexuality or disabilities seemed to be a prevalent topic of concern.

While the interviewees were highly motivated to support and help others, they also expressed hesitation in the face of it. Aura describes an approach to intersectional support that differs from Noel's view:

..I felt a little like, am I good enough a feminist for this and can I treat this topic well enough since it includes racism and racializing and other things I don't have personal experience of, like am I able to do this well enough? But then I realized that that's exactly why I have to do this, if I'm questioning my capacities a little bit, then I will surely invest in it.

While Noel and Aura have different approaches to the phenomenon, they were motivated to act. Yet, the way discriminations intersect also caused challenges in fighting them. For instance, one participant critiqued intersectional feminists for dismissing issues where racial and gender discrimination overlap:

People have said to me that we can't talk for another group of people in the name of feminism. I think this is a significant issue, how can it be that..? I mean when you defend human rights, you should not think like okay, they belong to that box or that box, I can't say anything about their problems.

According to this respondent, there are currently controversies in the ways feminists support discriminated groups that they are not a part of. For example, respecting the cultural values of discriminated ethnic groups, in some cases, lead to the fear of interfering as an overbearing member of a more powerful majority population. As a result, an interviewee argued, certain

issues are avoided altogether, which leads to neglecting feminist problems in minority cultures.

Despite these controversies, the general wish was to support various discriminated groups and their right to have equal opportunities. As such, this phenomenon echoes more notions of third-wave feminism than neoliberal feminism. For instance, Snyder (2008) characterized the third wave as underscoring multivocality over coalescence and feminism as a practice of inclusivity. In the same essay, Snyder conveys that in the third wave, feminism is different to each individual. This was not only true in the sense that all participants had slightly different definitions of feminism, but also in the way many distinctly said it. “Everyone has their own definitions for that, of course”, as Aura phrased it. However, the interconnections between these findings and ideas of neoliberal feminism are scarce. In emphasizing multivocality and intersectional care, in demanding social changes, and in contesting injustices based on socioeconomical, sexual, and racial aspects, they simply do not paint the picture of neoliberal feminism that Ferguson (2017), Lakämper (2017), and Prügl (2015), among others, are painting. Finally, let us inspect in the following section the findings on soft values on an individual, interpersonal level.

5.4.2 Interpersonal Feminist Attributes

Whilst noting the value of softer characteristics in the societal system, the interviewees also felt the need for softer values in interpersonal contexts and leadership in particular. The participants’ approach to leadership was akin to Goyal’s (2014, p. 2) understanding of feminist (political) leadership which not only shares the power but strives to “change the nature of power”. On an individual level, this change entails increasing collective thinking in leadership. Aura argues:

..if I think about leadership in general and where it needs feminism or whether it needs it at all, then I do think that feminism as an ideology and a research tradition raises many important questions about the ethics of caretaking and other ones that may be surprisingly useful, or reflect the kind of leadership that I respect.

In this vein, a majority of the respondents argued that workplaces would benefit from leaders with feminist approaches. Aura suggested that leaders operating with a sense of community rather than competitiveness would be welcomed. Nadja endorsed the leaders’ capacity to have

an effective dialogue and listen, as well as recognizing others' potential. Noel also advocated the skill of listening and underscored the importance of inclusion. According to most participants, these are strengths currently more exhibited by women. The reasons behind this, however, proved complex.

The narratives on these required leadership and personality traits reflected two approaches, often overlapping and tentative. First approach dissolves gender in that women's and men's leadership and professional behavior were not considered to differ. For instance, Mia reflects as follows:

We are women, people who identify as women with stereotypically feminine features and traits and behaviors, too, but how does that affect our leadership? Does it matter? How come I would be, as a woman, somehow different as a leader or perhaps less competent or qualified? Somehow I don't.. I don't know, these are such difficult questions.

One may argue that affirming that competent women lead in the same way than competent men do implicates that women succeed in acting according to market principles. Here, a connection can be drawn to McRobbie's (2015) and Gill's (2007) idea of the neoliberalized individual. In adopting the market principles, women reproduce the behavioral culture that some would describe masculine; confident, competitive, and assertive. In doing so, they succeed by playing by the existing rules and expectations. This is supported by some participants' acknowledged inclination to act "more like men" in the professional life—while also critically questioning such behavior, it must be added. On the other hand, the findings on toughness and success suggest that toughness is a natural characteristic to many women in the study. Can it then be derived that assertive behavior in the working life is rather a sign of neoliberal discipline and an *act* than a characteristic of a female? And further, even as a natural characteristic, should it be subdued to make room for softer values? The second view on the gendered traits illustrates such values.

The second approach abstains from dissolving gender in the sense that women are considered to (be able to) exhibit certain strengths more than men in the current climate. These traits were both described as "feminine" and considered "feminist". In a social constructionistic approach, the participants attributed such differences to upbringing, stereotypes, and experiences. Essentialistic reasons of biology were not entirely excluded as possibilities, either. Which ever the rationale may be, the respondents deemed these

characteristics beneficial in interpersonal and professional contexts. Take for example Nadja's commentary:

..the ability to have good dialogue, seeing others' capacities and potentials, that is, their abilities and what each one can do — qualities that are seen as feminine in our culture — are precisely those social skills. . .they are very valuable skills, I mean extremely valuable.

Amelia considered the gendered traits in leadership as a two-fold concept. First, they argued that women possess a higher ability to empathize due to their role as caretakers, and as a result, they make decisions with a heightened awareness of collective good. Second, Amelia found that if more women operated in leading roles while men were more involved in caretaking—i.e. raising children on parental leave—then men, too, would lead with the necessary skills of empathy.

Nevertheless, no participant declared feminine traits as *inherent* to women more than to men. Roles and stereotypes, above all, were considered significant in defining which features are more likely exhibited by each gender. In addition, many dismissed the binary of femininity of women and masculinity of men altogether. Take for instance Nadja's view:

..we are so eager to pigeonhole things as opposites. There are masculine and feminine or there are good or bad. And when we think of masculine and feminine, we somehow think that feminine features automatically come along with women and masculine features with men, which is not the case. We may also be blind to the feminine features of men or, perhaps, they don't feel comfortable bringing them forth.

Noel's approach exemplifies a multi-layered ambiguity of the topic:

..there are, above all, structures and assumptions about what people consider good leadership and on the other hand, what kind of features different genders have. And this may have been constructed throughout the years so that the features that are men are assumed to have, like competitiveness, rationality and so on, are also characteristics of good leaders. And then there are those traits that are associated with womanhood, whether they are accurate or not, like empathy or something, which are considered qualities of bad leadership.

In essence, the findings demonstrate that gender and leadership is a territory with many prevailing questions still, not least among feminists. This nature of ambiguity and questioning does not reflect the caricature of neoliberal agency which underscores assertive adaptation

to the competitive rationale. Above all, it contradicts Ferguson's (2017) arguments of neoliberal feminists dissolving the significance of gender. The meaning and byproducts of gender was instead much discussed and reflected upon by the feminists in this study. Finally, in addition to the individual feminist traits that we have considered thus far, another individual value contrasting neoliberalist feminism surfaced in the interviews.

What emerged from the data is that the participants appraised achievement by measures other than capital or power. To examine this value, we may first consider the contrasting picture of a neoliberal feminist. According to the caricatured depictions, the privileged neoliberal co-opts patriarchal neoliberal capitalism and counts economic success as equality (Gill, 2017; Rottenberg, 2014). The participants, most of which considered to have succeeded in their craft thus far, did not equate individual successes with equality. Further, rather than ambitions of money or power, the interviewees noted self-developmental intentions as their long-term objectives. As main goals in the working life, Nadja lists "developing and appreciating myself and my curiosity". Irina notes: "I don't set [economic or tangible] goals. Instead, I constantly set goals such as that I want to develop and become a better writer and a better journalist." When discussing leadership, the participants seemed hesitant to describe themselves as holding power or influence. Whether a reflection of their ideals or a real characteristic, it appeared that soft values played a large role in the interviewees' approaches to life.

The emergent soft values examined in this subsection are again formulated into an adapted Theory Diagram model. This is presented in Figure 5 below.

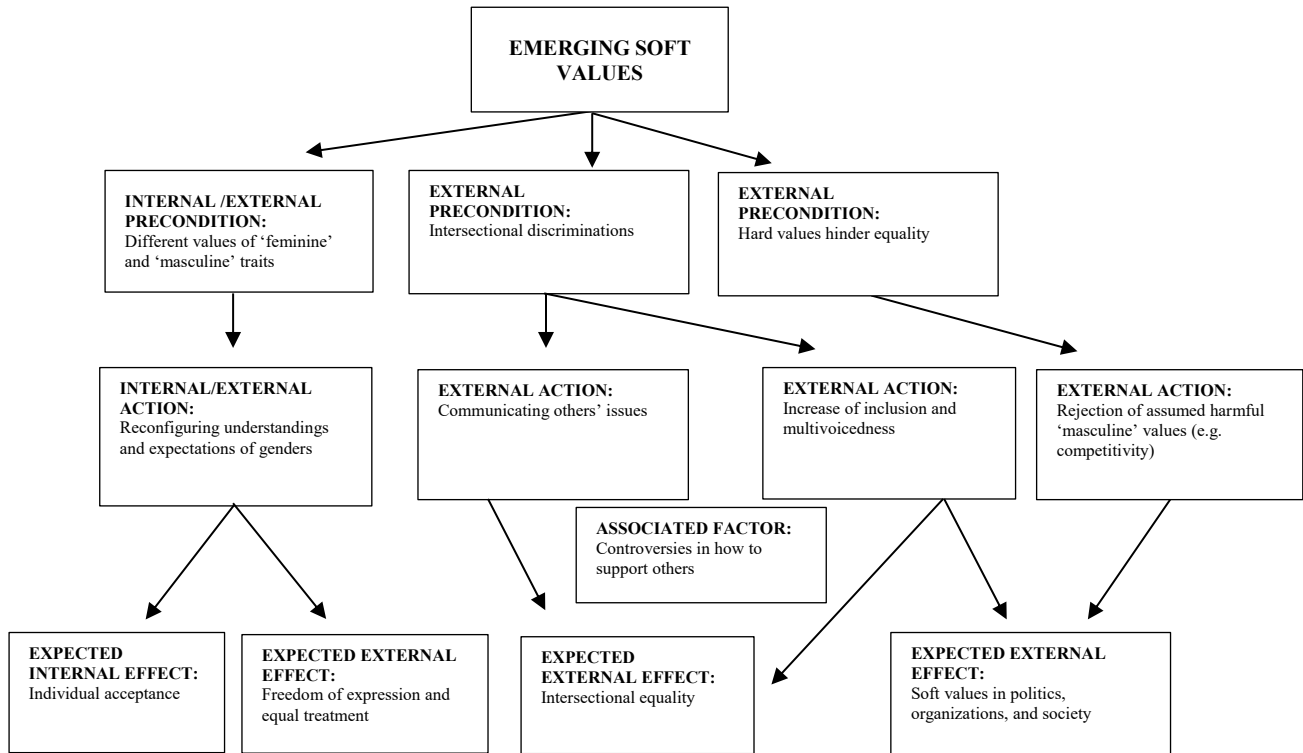


Figure 5: A Model of Preconditions, Actions, and Results of Emerging Soft Values in Feminism

Emerging soft values are depicted in Figure 5. The elements considered “femine and masculine values”, and the dichotomy in their valuations, are an issue both individualistically and structurally, according to the respondents. In consequence, the complex reconfiguration of those understandings is considered to be a task on both levels. However, this was an issue where most demands for structural changes were demanded. In particular, hard values in societal systems and power structures were identified as a major structural issue. Because of the broad impacts of this concept, an accentuated importance was placed on achieving diversified, collective values in the society.

This chapter as a whole presented the core variables identified in the data. The four core variables are self-observation, internal boundaries, success and leadership, and emerging soft values. Next, the following chapter juxtaposes these themes with broader notions of neoliberal feminism and society and answers the research questions.

Chapter 6: Findings and Discussion

This chapter answers the research questions by comparing the core categories to the concept of neoliberal feminism, which is based on the review of section **3.1.3 The neoliberal empowered feminist**. First, let us reiterate the main research question of this study:

Q1: To what extent does contemporary feminism in Finland demonstrate neoliberal self-reliant agency?

In addition, the two secondary research questions were:

Q2: Which practices of self leadership, if any, are used in individual efforts driven by feminism?

Q3: In what manner do practices of self leadership correspond with the idea of neoliberalized feminism?

The ensuing sections first answer the secondary research questions. These answers ultimately lead us to unravel the main research question. Section **6.1** reviews the neoliberal individualization of gender inequalities. Next, section **6.2** investigates “womenomics” and self-optimization toward economic prosperity. Finally, section **6.3** examines the privatization of political responses by self leadership.

6.1 Individualization: Creating Neoliberal Destinies

For decades, feminism has developed as a part of society. Correspondingly, societal and cultural changes have been reflected in the forms and movements of feminism. For some fifty years now, many Western societies have adopted neoliberalistic elements, namely, the celebration of choice and individualism in free markets (Braedley & Luxton, 2010).

Likewise, heightened self-reliance and individual political agency have emerged in portrayals of feminism. According to Lakämper (2017) and a number of other scholars, the mainstream feminism has been de facto co-opted by the ideology of neoliberalism. This section focuses on the first principal criticism towards neoliberalization of feminism: individualization. In this process, the existing gender inequalities are framed as a result of individual choices and respectively, the resolutions are regarded as individualistic. As Eisenstein (2007, p. 37)

denotes, the “competitive individual” is made responsible for any issue they may have in the society. In this manner, argue Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017), neoliberalization urges women to create their destinies through individualized and economic policies. Such policy is the self leadership practice, which according to this study is connected to feminism in various ways. This brings us to answer one of the research questions: ‘Which practices of self leadership, if any, are used in individual efforts driven by feminism?’

As one could acquire from section 5.1, the findings of this study suggest that several self leadership practices are used in feminist actualizations. The most prevalent strategy is *self-observation*, which was deemed foundational not only for the self leadership practice but also for the understandings of feminism. The participants connected observing the *self* to observing the *society* en masse and thus, recognized themselves as active shapers of it. This finding supports Ferguson’s (2017), and contradicts Fraser’s (2013), depiction of the feminist political agent. Fraser characterizes neoliberalism as the agentic omnipotent force that has overtaken (passive) feminists. In contrast, Ferguson portrays feminists as capable and responsible of creating change and affect political developments such as neoliberalism. By visualizing political change simultaneously in themselves and in the society, the participants in this study demonstrated political agency—and it had complex effects. For instance, many interviewees described *self-observation* as an on-going habit in their life. On occasion, it led to a kind of performance where the behavior that they described as “feminine” or “masculine” was altered to affect the impression that it was assumed to leave on others. On the other hand, it was an effective tool of dissecting internalized stereotypes and constructions.

In much lesser frequencies, the interviewees used other behavioral strategies, as well as the natural reward strategy of *refocusing thoughts*. Interestingly, the constructive thought pattern strategies were most distinctly used for feminist objectives. The feminists tended to *self-talk* and use *mental imagery* to internally encourage themselves to dismiss stereotypes. Further, they *replaced dysfunctional thought patterns* in order to oppose their own stereotyping towards others. The findings of this study suggest, then, that a number of self leadership practices are used in individual efforts framed by feminism. Is this a reflection of the individualized feminist who battles inequalities by self-reliant change? It certainly touches on Gill’s (2017) idea of a responsabilized, neoliberalized feminist who operates on power postures and words of encouragement. According to this portrayal, the neoliberal turn of feminism postulates that by private encouragement, everyone is capable of thriving by the

same existing rules. In this way, it neglects the effects of privilege, supports the neoliberal structure, and betrays the less fortunate individual.

Truly, overlooking privilege is one of the most poignant criticisms toward neoliberalized feminism and publications such as Sandberg's *Lean In*. They are indicted of "white feminism" and excluding the people whose realities are less fortunate. The findings of this research do not correspond with such idea. Despite a certain degree of self-reliant responsibility, the participants in this study of the Finnish context demonstrated beliefs and actions rather opposing the exclusive undertones. The problems of socioeconomic, racializing, sexual, and other inequalities were universally underscored, and personal privileges were widely recognized. The participants called for equal opportunities to all. Therefore, I argue that many scholarly critics' descriptions of neoliberal individualization of feminism are hyperbolic. They aggravate, perhaps not by mistake, that altering internal beliefs and behavior is a sign of surrendering to the omnipotent neoliberal oppression. By this logic, internal changes and structural or cultural criticism cannot co-exist, at least not while maintaining credibility and loyalty to critical feminism. Yet the findings suggest that the reality is not that polarized. Individual and internal efforts are not detached from motivation to solve communal and structural problems. Instead, feminism may be developing into a movement which recognizes the power and legitimacy of both levels of action.

Next, let us consider the second characteristic of the criticized neoliberal feminism. It stems from the concept of individualism and entails that the celebrated feminist individualism is actually a tool to transform individuals into effective and uniform participants of the capitalist machinery.

6.2 Womenomics: Entrepreneurship of the Self

The second cardinal criticism towards neoliberalization of feminism is the notion of "womenomics" (Eisenstein, 2017, p. 35). According to numerous scholarly critics, the neoliberal "entrepreneur of the self" (Prügl, 2015, p. 620) proves women's liberation by effective participation in capitalism (e.g. Ferguson, 2007; Gill, 2007; Prügl, 2015). This view is criticized for neglecting inequalities outside production, one of which is work of social reproduction (Eisenstein, 2017). In this manner, equality is reduced into the idea that as long as everyone can participate in the workforce and become economically independent, they are equal. Those who have reached individual, economic success, are taken as the epitome of equality, argues Lakämper (2017). This view is contrasted by the feminists in this study

which do not hold individual achievements of power or property as indicators of equality. Certainly, the interviewees themselves did value personal success in their craft. The participants were professionally accomplished in different ways. Rather than commercially successful specifically, the participants could be described as professionally, societally, and/or politically accomplished or influential. Yet they did not consider their individual deeds as examples of equality, critiquing the persistent attitudinal, social, and legislative biases reproduced from history that continue to discriminate certain groups of people. Multivocality was demanded into all corners of society and in particular the political and decision-making arenas. Integral to the solution, they argued, is diversified leadership which in turn requires advancement of women and other less represented groups.

“Womenomics” encourage women to train themselves to fit into an unattainable structure combining production and social reproduction. Promoting such self-regulation as the feminism of professional life has provoked many a scholar. According to McRobbie (2013), the feminist entrepreneurs take the route of optimizing themselves to suit market principles. As a prime antagonist to many a critical essayist on neoliberalism, Facebook COO Sandberg has been argued to support such movement with their publication *Lean In*, which recounts the ways in which individuals can make changes that help them improve their professional life. The book urges women to alter their behavior by increasing assertiveness and confidence in situations such as the pay negotiation. In essence, this resonates with Gill’s (2017, p. 16) “confidence culture” where the lack of confidence, considered as women’s principal obstacle, is transformed via a “gendered technology of the self” (ibid., p. 26).

The discourse of feminists in this study demonstrate that such inner reshaping does take place in the professional context. Numerous feminists conveyed that their natural assertive and “tough” behavior had helped them achieve professional status and credibility. Others described a lack of confidence and cultivated the trait by self leadership practices. Therefore it is legitimate to argue that a flavor of neoliberal values has become a part of the (feminist) reality of worklife. Yet there was a difference in reflections of reality and ideals. Being tough was not regarded as a solution to inequalities but rather an echo of the current social climate. In contrast to neoliberalistically adopting market conventions (McRobbie, 2015), the participants wished to challenge them. Instead of rendering themselves to be a prototype of a traditional professional—serious, tough, and non-feminine in their words—the respondents wished to diversify the images of professionalism and leadership. While some did find it necessary to alter their (“feminine”) behaviors and appearances, the participants generally demanded a change of assumptions and stereotypes rather than uniformity to

traditional expectations. Moreover, the interviewees recognized the necessity of characteristics such as collectivity and inclusivity in broader contexts. Therefore, what many suggested was a transformation towards a society with softer values.

Further, the feminists' views of the future surpassed the neoliberal economic emphasis of "transnational business feminism" (Eisenstein, 2017, p. 38). In contrast to feminists as pieces of capitalism machinery, the individuals strived for intangible self development. The majority of the interviewees demonstrated a heightened interest in cultivating their creativity, skills, and experiences. Simultaneously, they acknowledged their advantageous disposition that allowed focusing on such elaborate goals. While undoubtedly individualistic, such goals do not adhere with the neoliberal insistence on economic success.

The last discussion section concern privatized political responses. In this conclusive section, the remaining research questions are answered.

6.3 Privatization of Political Responses: Empowerment as Solution

The third essential criticism toward neoliberalized feminism is the privatization of political responses. Central to this concept is personal responsibility of inequalities which, in the mainstream feminisms today, is framed by positive encouragement of the self and others (Ferguson, 2017). By such responsabilization, structural hindrances are dismissed as internal boundaries only, and empowerment is pictured as the resolution. Gill (2017) argues that the neoliberal depiction of empowerment essentially tries to make feminism appealing and consumer-friendly. In accordance, Eisenstein (2017) denotes the concept has lost meaning, alluding to Andi Zeisler's reference to a headline in a satirical newspaper *The Onion*: "Women Now Empowered by Everything a Woman Does". Yet the findings suggest that empowerment is still more than a slogan in current feminism.

The results of this study imply that empowerment—both of the self and others—is a tool used for feminist objectives. The participants estimated, although tentatively, that internal and external empowerment can be a beneficial means to battle internal boundaries that hinder groups of individuals that experience negative biases or inaptitudes. First, while requiring shifts in the society, they denoted that encouraging women to act boldly can be useful because the current social climate works in contradictory manner. Second, a majority of the respondents demonstrated internal empowerment in the form of self leadership strategies such as self-talk. Are these phenomena an illustration of Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce's (2017) portrayal of a neoliberal feminist that calls out structural inequalities but

reacts to them with an individualized responsibility? Not entirely, I argue. They are not neoliberalistic because the interviewees throughout emphasized structural and cultural shifts over personal empowerment. They are, however, neoliberalistic in that numerous external or societal issues were battled with internal and personal strategies.

It does not seem satisfactory to claim that assuming responsibility of structural problems means submission to neoliberalism and patriarchy. This is particularly evident in the case of self-identified feminists who, assumably, pay particular attention to topics of feminism and equality, and their actions in relation to those things. Instead, it seems that the line between structural and individual issues has become faded. The feminists recognized the interconnectivity of structural problems to attitudes, stereotypes, and intangible biases. To exemplify, legislative and cultural problems such as pregnancy discrimination were perceived to stem from attitudes and understandings of social order. Such attitudes and biased beliefs were not deemed a specialty of some corrupt group of oppressors but instead, inherent to the individuals and their shared history. As a result, the participants recognized an individual responsibility in societal and political issues, which again resonates with Ferguson's (2017) conception of feminists as agentic political actors capable of constructing the society.

From these perspectives, we can unravel the answer to the research question "In what manner do practices of self leadership correspond with the idea of neoliberalized feminism?" First, it must be addressed that the interviewees were not familiar with, and thus were not acknowledgingly *applying* the *self leadership practice*. Rather, some of their actions adhered to individual strategies of the practice. In consequence, one cannot derive that the *practice* does or does not correspond with neoliberalized feminism based on this sample. What can be concluded is that practices of self-reliant agency, which self leadership is certainly exemplifies, does correspond with neoliberal feminism in specific ways. Feminist self-reliance is an individualistic practice that seeks solutions to multilevel problems by internal change. The personal strategies used are characteristic of the neoliberal feminist that monitors and optimizes themselves rather than the larger structures. In addition, primarily focusing on self-regulative solutions can divert focus from the broader root causes of inequality.

Yet, Manz's (2015) depiction of self leadership as a practice that can be collectively beneficial proved realistic. Manz argued that self leadership is an inherently individualistic practice which can ultimately be used for shared social benefit. According to this view, the strategies are entwined with responsibility that derives from the self but influences everyone. The findings reproduce this view in many an instance, out of which the most evident is self leadership used to reconstruct society. The participants interconnected their responsibility to

alter themselves with the reproduction of reality. In this way, neoliberalistic tools were used for non-neoliberal ends, leading me to argue that practices of self-reliant political agency, those including self leadership, correspond with neoliberal feminism only superficially.

The above reflections finally lead us to the main research question: “To what extent does contemporary feminism in Finland demonstrate neoliberal self-reliant agency?” In order to dissect this topic, I allude to the means and objectives of feminism.

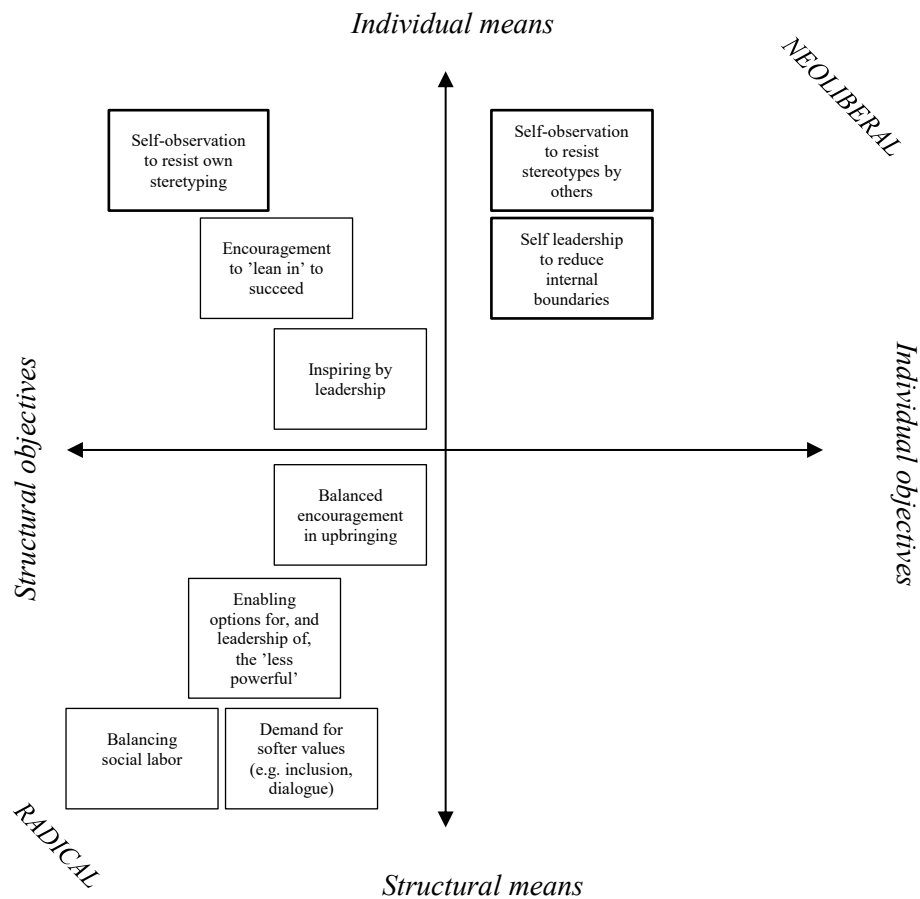


Figure 6: Feminist Measures and Objectives in relation to their Individualist or Structural Viewpoint

Figure 6 presents feminist means and objectives on axes from individualistic, personal and self-regulative approach to structural and collective approach. One can identify, although by simplifying a complex matter, a scale of neoliberal feminism in the figure. The upper-right corner represents neoliberal “entrepreneur of the self” with its intersection of individualistic measures and individualistic goals. Comparatively, the bottom-left corner reflects a more

radical vein of feminism that uses structural means for structural goals. Self leadership practices are marked with an accentuated frame. On the whole, the figure outlines what emerged in the narratives of feminists in this study.

In essence, feminism in the Finnish context today demonstrates neoliberal self-reliant agency to a limited degree. Based on this study, self-regulation is a prevalent measure of reaching not only personal but also larger societal feminist goals. Feminists are self-reliant in changing the internalized biases of themselves and others. In addition, they see value in encouraging and inspiring while still acknowledging the root of the need to do so. To shift those roots, however, they rely on societal restructuration that includes attitudinal changes starting from childhood. Further, feminism continues to demand same rights and opportunities to all, not only entailing respect and being heard, but also opportunities to influence and advance. There are also more radical questions looming about the values that the current structure is based on. Some settle not to equal opportunities within the current system but seek an all-encompassing societal revolution. In conclusion, feminism has developed in sync with other societal changes and adopted certain elements of neoliberalism. Fraser's (2013) notion of thoroughly neoliberalized feminism, however, is ungrounded.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This research examined the claim of scholars such as Nancy Fraser (2013) who argue that feminism is neoliberalizing. According to Fraser, along with others such as Lakämper (2017), McRobbie (2012; 2015) and Rottenberg (2017), neoliberalized feminism emphasizes individual choice and optimization over structural criticism. In consequence, the particular research interest was to discover whether, and to what extent, contemporary feminism actualizes neoliberalist values. In practice, the study inspected the emergence of the neoliberalistic practise of self leadership.

Based on the findings of this research it is not justified to claim that feminism, in the examined context, is neoliberalized. However, particular neoliberal characteristics certainly exist in feminism in the Finnish context. The feminists in this research were highly self-conscious and demonstrated a great deal of self-reliant political agency. Immaterial self-development and advancements in personal craft were important for most participants. Internal boundaries that inhibited such advancements were acknowledged, and while structural reasons were recognized as their principal reason, individualistic measures were taken to battle them. For instance, those who felt like they are not up to par with the confidence needed at the workplace used self leadership to reach that level of courage and assurance. In addition, the stance on encouraging women and other less represented groups to act more boldly was generally positive. Finally, some felt the need to dissolve the personal, feminine features that in their view do not fit the traditional portrayal of credibility and professionalism. In essence, these findings resonate with “the entrepreneur of the self”.

Nevertheless, one cannot claim that feminism has become entirely *neoliberalized* for a number of reasons. First, many of the individualistic tools of self leadership were applied in order to reach collective and structural advancements. For instance, the self was observed in relation to the understandings of societal stereotypes and expectations, which were critically examined to contest them. Second, consciousness of intersectional discriminations and privilege was evident in all interviews regardless of the understanding of feminism. Therefore, individual success was not taken in lieu of equality. Furthermore, despite the efforts to succeed in the society that undoubtedly is capitalistic, the existing values and requirements were heavily questioned. In addition, leadership and power were not deemed important in simple individualistic terms. Instead, equal opportunities to reach leadership were perceived important for representational reasons, and for that purpose, inspirational

leadership was advocated. Third, even the most clearly self-leading participants were adamant about the necessary structural changes, which completely conflicts with the notion of a neoliberal, self-regulating feminist who neglects structural issues.

In conclusion, feminism has acquired a collection of neoliberal features, most of which are individual tools used for collective benefit. To argue that all individualistic measures are tainting the collective and structural objectives of feminism is ill-advised. As the deliberation of this research, Kabeer's (1999) notion is illuminating; empowerment entwines individual development with structural change. In other words, work for equality always entails individualism because individual effort constructs our society and reality.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview questions

BACKGROUND

- Who are you and what do you do?
- In your opinion, what is feminism (in the Finnish context)?
 - What do you consider the most significant societal issues* at the moment (with feminist perspective)?
 - How do you think these objectives can be attained?
 - Who are the most significant actors in this work?
- Have you experienced (any of the previously mentioned issues) in your personal life?
 - Has it slowed down your own development or achieving your goals?
- What do you think about leadership and leading (from the feminist perspective)?
- Does leadership need feminist development?
 - Should leadership be more feminist, or, should there be more women/other groups of people in influential positions?
- Do you think women should be encouraged to act more boldly in society?

ACHIEVEMENTS

- If you think with a feministic frame; what has been one of your greater accomplishments? How did you achieve it?
 - Did issues* in equality somehow affect achieving this?
 - What motivated you?
 - How did you maintain your motivation? Did you
 - Set goals?
 - Observe your behavior/thoughts?
 - Try to influence your thinking?
 - Feel affected by your surroundings/other people?

CHALLENGES

- Think of a moment where you felt you failed or did not reach your goal (as a feminist). What was the failure? How did you react?
 - What did you proceed?
 - Did you try to learn from the situation?
- Have you doubted yourself?
 - How did you proceed with the situation?
 - Did you try to encourage yourself? How?

SELF LEADERSHIP (brief introduction)

- Do you (in which ways?) lead yourself?
 - Do you observe the way you think or behave? Do you try to influence it?
 - Do you optimize your surroundings?
 - Do you set goals for yourself?
 - Do you consciously motivate yourself?
-
- Do you think that self leadership has significance for reaching feminist goals?

CONCLUSION

- Do you feel like reaching feminist objectives is your responsibility?
- What other thoughts arose?

Appendix B: Codebook

Report created on 21 Oct 2019

- *Linguistical effort
- ANTI-neolib-f
- CAUSE: How we are raised affects view of capacities
- Collective feminism
- FEMINISM: Definition: freedom in behavior and existence
- FEMINISM: Definition: individual choice
- FEMINISM: Definition: polyphony and reflection over leadership
- FEMINISM: Definition: same opportunities in life for all kinds, intersectional
- FEMINISM: Definition: women's movement
- FEMINISM: Issues
- Gender diffused
- Gender not diffused: feminist/womanly characteristics (in leadership)
- Individual proactivity advances success
- Inspirational feminism
- ISSUE: Attitudes: condescending behavior
- ISSUE: Biased dialogue
- ISSUE: Control over women's choice
- ISSUE: Financial inequality
- ISSUE: Gendered professions
- ISSUE: Gendered violence and harrassment
- ISSUE: Influencing society is harder for some
- ISSUE: Internal boundaries
- ISSUE: Intersectional discrimination
- ISSUE: Media reproduces inequality
- ISSUE: Reproduction sets women back professionally
- ISSUE: Stereotypes and roles
- ISSUE: Unequal laws
- ISSUE: Unequal opportunities in life
- ISSUE: Worklife: credibility of women
- ISSUE: Worklife: unequal opportunities
- Neolib-empowerment, leaning in
- PATH TO EQUALITY: Changes in law
- PATH TO EQUALITY: Encourage individual action (brave)
- PATH TO EQUALITY: Giving voice
- PATH TO EQUALITY: Increase awareness by spreading message
- PATH TO EQUALITY: Individual proactivity: communicate message
- PATH TO EQUALITY: Individual proactivity: own behavior
- PATH TO EQUALITY: Societal structural changes
- PATH TO EQUALITY: Those in power act

- PATH TO EQUALITY: Women in leadership
- Pressure to be a perfect feminist
- Self development
- Self leadership ANTI
- SL: Behavior: Self-cueing
- SL: Behavior: Self-goal setting
- SL: Behavior: Self-observation
- SL: Behavior: Self-punishment
- SL: Reward: Embedding
- SL: Reward: Refocusing
- SL: Thought: Mental Imagery
- SL: Thought: Replacing Thought Patterns
- SL: Thought: Self-talk
- Toughness helps in succeeding
- Toughness, seriousness, boldness, confidence
- Wishing not to be called a feminist
- Women should do something more like men do
- Women should talk about issues collectively

Appendix C: Table of co-occurrences on the scale of 3 to 6

[illegible]